The Hudson Review

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David Mason
The Country I Remember

Peter Makuck
Costly Habits—a story

George Watson
C.S. Lewis—a memoir

Lucille Day
In the Hidden Garden

Harold Fromm
O, Paglia Mia!

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HOUSTON GRAND OPERA BY Josiah Fisk

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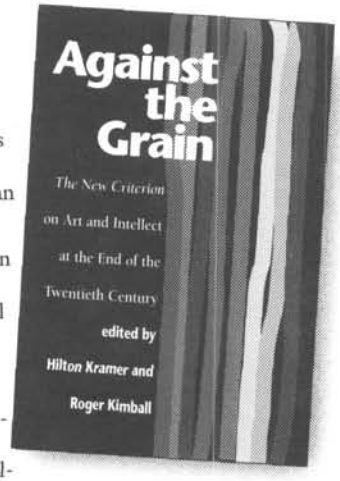
Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball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The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century
edited by
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A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

New books by an Advisory Editor and a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

FREDERICK BROWN: *Zola: A Life.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $37.50.

JOHN LOUGHERY: *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel.* Henry Holt and Company. $35.00.

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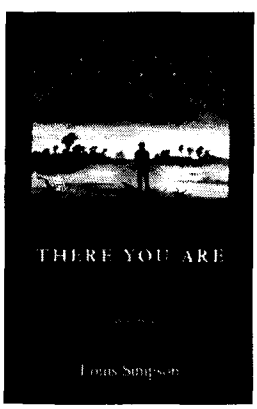

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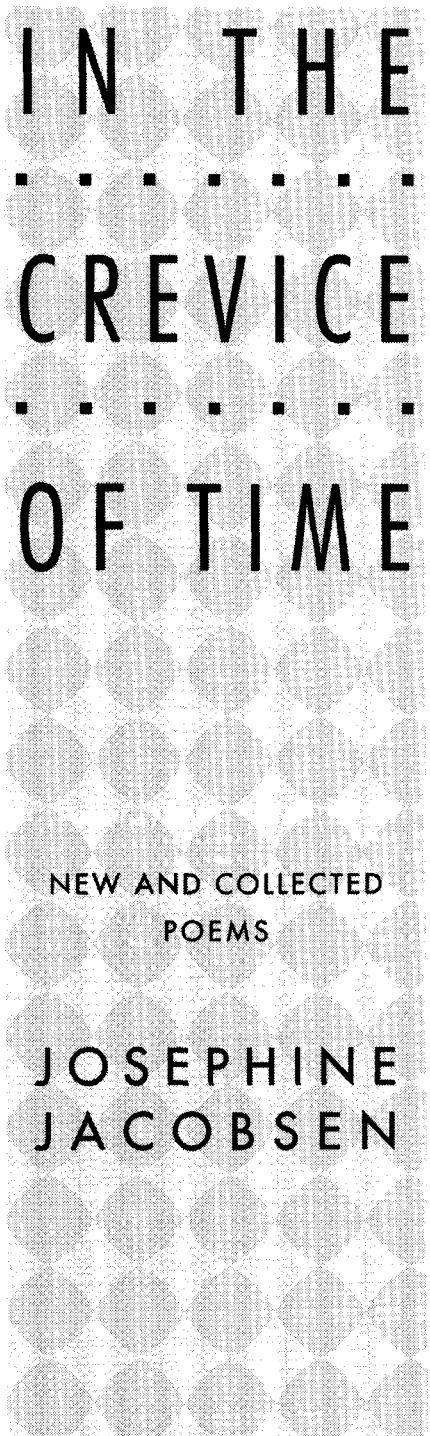

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DAVID MASON

The Country I Remember: A Narrative

> The campfire embers are black and cold,
> The banjos are broken, the stories are told,
> The woods are cut down, and the young grown old.
> —W.H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan*

How We Came This Far

Mrs. Maggie Gresham, Los Angeles, two years before her death in 1956:

The rattle and sway of the train as it clattered across
leagues of open grassland put me to sleep,
and I dreamed of Illinois where land was flat
and safe as anything that I had known.
I woke to find my sisters counting bones
on the prairie, and the sky beyond our smoke
was a dusty blue. We were heading west.

Papa slept beneath his broad-brimmed hat
and Mama sewed—she made the pinafore
that I was wearing. I knelt beside my sisters,
watching land go by from the wooden seat
like waves of a great ocean being tossed.
The snow had melted, and everywhere it seemed
were bones like cages with no birds inside.

We'd packed a cheese, a stack of pies, boiled ham
and jars of fruit preserves from our old farm.
The Indians would come aboard each stop,
begging for food, or selling calico.
In Cheyenne my sister Beatrice had croup
and Mr. Kress said to take some snuff with lard
and spread it on her throat—that cured her quick.

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I remember looking out the train at night,
trying to count the dark shapes passing by
and seeing our faces pressed against the glass
like children looking back from another world.
I thought of bones in the embrace of weeds,
of Indians who vanished on the prairie,
of hills that swayed and rumbled like our train.

Had my Papa brought us to this empty place
in desperation? I watched his regal head
nodding on his chest, the long V of beard
flowing over his crossed and worsted arms.
I was the happiest child when we had left
the farm, but now I prayed
the night would not destroy us like the lost.

The poets told us that this land was new
but, though I was a child, I understood
it was as ancient as the word of God,
and we were like those wandering tribes of old;
no one had chosen us to travel west,
and it would serve no purpose for a girl
to question choices that her parents made.

I knew this fear would always follow me
wherever I went, that I was not real,
that no one really lived who bore my name.
The lamplit face upon the swaying glass
was all that I would ever know of truth.
When Mama snuffed the lamp, my other face
retreated to the land of passing shadows.

*

Next morning while our mother brewed our tea
on one of the coal stoves inside the car,
I felt us being hauled away from dawn
by force of steam, and heard my Papa speak
to Mr. Kress of wars that he had fought in—
they whispered so we children wouldn't hear,
and Mr. Kress no longer looked so jolly.

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The war that made my Papa look so old
happened in Tennessee and in Virginia
long before my sisters and I were born.
War had taught my Papa to stand up straight.
War gave him his heavy cough each winter,
but we had never heard the things I heard
intended for the ears of Mr. Kress.

Then the tea was ready and the two men
roused us children for another day.
They knew the reason we were heading west
and understood the bones out in the grass.
They were like prophets in the holy book
interpreting the tablets for the tribe,
and we the children of an Israel

unspoken for except by all the dead.

*

Mr. Kress said good-bye in San Francisco.
From Portland we went inland on the river—
strange to be pointed toward the east again
as if our path were the snake that eats its tail.
After the rivers and mountains of our journey
the land we traveled through was dry and grassy,
and Papa kept his stories to himself.

He paced the riverboat, nodding at land
because he'd known some part of it in youth
and memory had made him bring us back.
Washington Territory
looked for all we knew like the Holy Land,
and 1880 was our year of hope
and we believed our Papa understood

what made the wind blow steady off the buttes.

*

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Papa bought the ranch near Pomeroy
and he had the first-ever frame house built
in the Blue Mountains, which were more like hills.
There the little savagery of childhood
ran its course—we tried to be young ladies,
but winters were hard; we had to dig out,
keeping the axe and shovel in the house.

Snow drifted over fields and filled the lanes,
so Papa built a sled with a wagon box
and we rode to school over the tops of fences.
I had a dog named Buster who got lost
in a blizzard. Some of the men rode out
but saw no sign of him until that spring
a passing cowboy said he'd seen the bones.

Time passed. I thought of Buster on the prairie
and how we came this far from Illinois,
counting the bones beside the railroad tracks.
The snow had gone. The hills were turning green
and I was tired of all our little chores
on Papa's ranch, tired of staying home
with only a slow spinsterhood before me.

We came this far, and maybe I could go
farther on my own. Papa had slowed down
but wandering was in my blood—and his—
and he would have to understand my going
and how no place had ever been my home.
As long as I was moving there was hope
that I would find the place we all had sought—

even my Papa, back when he was young.

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Cobb's Orchard

Lt. Mitchell shortly before his death at Pomeroy, Washington, in 1918:

A hungry army's enough to spook the dead
the way it marches on without a sound,
only the clatter of our gear and wagons,
a noise of hoof and boot hemmed in by hills.
We were in McCook's force, pushing south,
the western flank of Rosecrans' three corps
butting General Bragg from Chattanooga.

Two days out of Goldsboro we ran short
of rations and had to feed off the country.
The first day without food my boys made do
with coffee. After that my colored man
went out with a sack to gather what he could.
He caught up when we camped on Willow Creek,
a heap of elderberries all he'd found.

"We'll feast on 'em," I said. The 79th
had gathered hay enough for all our horses.
My company had elderberry juice,
cooked in kettles and coffee pots for supper.
My Captain said, "Men, shake out your haversacks
for crumbs," but there wasn't enough to feed a bird
and the men fell quiet, looking at their boots.

Charley was my colored man. He'd no horse
so I gave him fifty cents to hire one,
told him to find our regimental sutler
back with the main force over the divide.
Next morning, Charley and the sutler came
just as the bugle sounded us to march,
and brought two wagons loaded down with food.

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His people were still slaves, but Charley was free
and came to work for me not long after
we formed the 79th in Illinois.
The boys had voted me Lieutenant 'cause
I'd done a bit of fighting in the west—
bought me a fine sword I was proud to wear.
Charley kept it polished till it gleamed.

I meant to ask him where his people were,
but never did. He couldn't read a map.
He told me once he didn't want the rebs
to catch him, fearing they would sell his hide.
When we got whipped at Chickamauga, Charley
had no place to run. He just stood still
and waited for the rebs to get a rope.

But all that hadn't happened when he rode for food. . . .

*

Two more days with no rations. We foraged
off the countryside as best we could.
I saw a Negro with his hat in his hand
ahead of us on the run. Charley and I
rode out to stop him. I wanted to know
what he was running from and if he knew
of anything out here to feed my men.

"Yes, suh," he says, pointing with his old hat.
He told of an orchard, five acres of fine
ripe peaches that belonged to Senator Cobb.
"They's a rise and a ridge with a basin 'tween the two
and right over that's a gulch and over that
they's peaches enough for all you Yankees there."
I rode back and reported to my Colonel.

"Colonel," I says, "perhaps you can recall
an ex-Senator Cobb who owns the land
not far over that rise." I said I wanted
men and wagons to feed the regiment.

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He let me go with twenty-one infantry
and the Sergeant, sixteen cavalrymen
for front and rear guards, the wagons and mules.

We found the orchard right where we were told,
and I got the boys to cut their way to it,
building a road so the wagons could cross the gulch.
We laid our ponchos underneath the trees
and shook loose peaches so ripe you could smell them,
filled two wagons, keeping one on reserve
for any vegetables that we might see.

It was a warm September day. The smell
of grass and dust and peaches hung in the air.
Except for our harvest sounds, all was silent.
As far as we could see, no people worked
the fields. All the men were fighting, I guess,
and who knows where the women hid themselves
with two great armies out upon the land?

I took my mounted men over the hill
to a large mansion, where I hollered, "Hello!"
A fat man stepped out who was full of whiskey.
"We have twenty-five thousand starving men,"
I told him. "If you have any food to give
I will receipt you for it. Swear loyalty
and you'll get paid."
"Damn your receipt," he said.

The boys unslung carbines to do him in
but I said we were only here for food
so let him be. The fat man cast an eye
up the ridge to my right, and there I saw
a mess of graycoats coming over the rise.
I gave the order and we spurred our horses
down where my men had backed the empty wagon

to a corn crib. They had filled it with white corn
and I said, "Boys, the rebs are after us!"
By this time I could hear their rebel yell

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and thought a hail of minié balls[1] would hit us.
You never saw a mule team move so fast
as ours did, but I knew the rebs were faster.
When we reached the road I had the wagons stop.

I had the teamsters run their mules to cover
and ordered the boys to line up double quick
in groups ten feet apart. The rebs had stopped
on the hill behind us. I drew my sword
and let the sunlight catch it so they could see
the Yanks were ready for them. My sergeant was
a big, hot fellow who wanted to fight.

He knew the rebs could hear him so he said,
"You folks want our grub, you'll have to come on down."
We saw that they were not ready to come;
they couldn't tell how many men I had.
Our pickets had some trouble the day before,
so I said, "Boys, give 'em hell." I had them fire
four times a minute for just three minutes.

The vidette cavalry rode up to see
our fight in time to watch the rebs back off.
My men let out three cheers for the enemy.
Then we were on our way with wagons full,
two of peaches, one of corn and brandy.
The shooting warmed us up enough; I knew
the boys on foot stepped lighter than before.

Looking up, I saw birds fly between the trees
and disappear amid the tangled branches.
They seemed to follow us and share our joy,
lighthearted creatures made for a bit of song.
It took me back, I don't mind telling you,
as if this road led to my family's farm,
turned west, and opened to the vast beyond.

[1] *minié balls*. Named for French Army Captain Claude E. Minié, who in 1848 perfected a bullet that could be rammed down the barrel of a rifled musket with greater ease than previous ammunition. These .58 caliber bullets left particularly bad wounds in men unlucky enough to be struck by them.

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But soldiers do like honey. At some bee stands
those who'd stolen a nip of brandy tried
to rob the hives; they had a worse skirmish
with those bees than the one with Johnny Reb.
You never saw so many stung-up fellows
raising dust as they leapt about the road.
I ordered a nip of brandy all 'round.

Half a mile on we saw hogs in the brush.
I rode to a nearby house and there found
an old couple dressed in homespun, sitting
in the shade of an oak. I asked about the hogs.
"Yes, suh, we've seven if you count Old Betty."
"We have twenty-five thousand starving men,"
I told them. "I'll receipt you for those hogs.

If you're loyal, you'll get paid. If not,
you'll get nothing."
"Hell, Yankee," the old man said,
"I'm as loyal as you are. I love the old flag.
Mother and I just have to play rebel."
Mother said, "Let them Yankees have the hogs.
The rebs will take them if you don't. Let them
have all but Old Betty, save Old Betty."

The boys went out and shot down six hogs,
all but Old Betty. I figured they were
two hundred pounds apiece, five cents a pound,
and wrote up a receipt for the old man
who touched my hand and wished me a safe journey.
Back then our farm in Illinois was much
like his, and it made me think of my wife and child.

We got back safe with peaches, corn, honey,
hogs and brandy, halted where the Colonel
rode out to meet us behind the picket lines.
"Did you have any trouble, Mitch?" he says.
"Yes Sir," I said, "we skirmished with some bees."

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The men were a great sight, so badly stung
we had to laugh, but they ate well that night.

Some of the corn was cooked by laying ears
in the hot ashes of the campfires, some
shelled and parched in the kettles of our cooks.
We slept well, but next day we had orders
to cross the river and march to Sand Mountain—
we were on our way to Chickamauga.
Supplies were never sent to that old couple,

which has bothered my mind for all these years.

All Houses Are Haunted

Mrs. Gresham:

Some nights in the Palouse the moon-blue sky
was windless, stars adrift in its forever.
No one knew how often I left the ranch
and walked alone out to the luminous fields,
my nightdress trailing in grass like spun silver,
and lost myself in meditation there
before the day I really left for good.

When you leave a place it is more beautiful
those last few days, the earth will open up
secrets you never guessed at: the hushed grass,
the bluish cottonwood that seems to wait
and breathe with you in solitary union.
Alone on a hill at night, you can feel
the world was made for us to listen to.

Other nights I thought us the accidents
of a sorry God, or worse. Overcome
by silence, I could feel the planet whirl
like a crazy bronco bucking through space—

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the best that we could do was grip the saddle.
Those were the nights I felt I would be crushed,
my family would wake and not recall me.

Who was I but the girl who read Longfellow
to her Papa when his war-damaged eyes
no longer focused on the page, and when
no men came by to listen to his stories?
My sisters loved the poets too, but I
was the one who read aloud. I understood
always that I was here to be a voice.

"All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses." Yes. And looking back
across the fields, so wide awake around
my Papa's house, I saw how fragile love is,
how easy to uproot from any place,
how hard to plant again. I was a voice,
an echo, if you will,

though nothing echoed in that open land.

Acoustic Shadows

Lt. Mitchell:

We climbed Sand Mountain and could see the dust
raised by Bragg's army beating a retreat.
That night we saw the flash of cannonfire
but didn't hear a sound. "Acoustic shadow,"
the Colonel called it, hillsides all lit up
like summer lightning, but only a drizzle
hissed and the men were too dead tired to hear.

Then Bragg vanished. We were ordered back
to Chattanooga where we suffered more:
no rations, and water in short supply

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so men drank from horse and mule tracks and wrung
out moisture from mud stuck to their ponchos.
Six miles out of Chattanooga we lay down
like dogs in the road beneath a long cliff.

More than a mile east we could see a belt
of timber marking the river's course, the smoke
of rebel campfires drifting from the trees.
They had chosen this for their battlefield.
During the night we heard them move to the ground
below us, bivouac so near we smelled
tobacco sweet enough to drive us mad.

Next morning the guns that woke us up
sounded a short ways up the line. Charley
brought me a cup of water he had scavenged.
"No more of them acoustic shades," he said,
and I could see he knew we were in for it.
The guns thudded and rapped like heavy mauls
driving a stout post deep into the ground.

I told the Colonel of a trick I learned
in the Indian campaigns out west. The men
could take one cartridge and suck a third
of the powder out. So stimulated then,
they would not think of their thirst; we'd be firing
at close range and would not need a full charge.
He sent the order out along the lines.

At daylight an orderly came from Chattanooga:
"Men, get out of the road," he said. "No cheering."
Then General Garfield and his staff rode through
the lines, twelve officers who raised their hats
to every color they passed. They all set
forward in their saddles just a little
and made a sight. We formed ranks in their wake.

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When my brigade came under enemy fire,
the rebs shot from breastworks of brush and rock.
The 79th Illinois marched up
on top of them before we shouldered rifles.
We opened fire at thirty steps. Crazed with thirst,
our desperate men knelt down and kept on firing,
stood and fired again into the thick smoke.

We fought our way toward water, all our guns
rattling till they made a single roar,
minié balls shredding through the grass and leaves
and boys dropping wounded to their knees.
We could see the timber belt, reached water
short of the river in a marsh. The men
threw off the scum and drank the puddles dry,

and found the spot alive with wiggle-tails.
We heard the rebels yell, and we yelled back,
though many of our boys were badly wounded.
For a moment the shooting stopped. My hand hurt
from gripping the hilt of my sword so tight,
but I was in one piece and saw to my men.
A fellow from Illinois fell next to me

and lay dead, staring up at the clouds,
blood thick in his beard. I saw where the ball
had ripped open his guts, and in his last
moments he had torn his tunic open
searching for the wound, now packed with dead leaves.
I just had time to dismount and close his eyes
and mutter a Lord have mercy over him.

But rebel sharpshooters still lay ahead
on a hill, their bullets cutting through the trees.
Men were hit, horses were hit, and finally
a ball grazed Colonel Butler on the shoulder,
so he shouted to Captain Clark, "Get rid
of those pesky fellows, will you?" I told
the Captain, "Give me eight men. We'll climb up

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that rock a quarter mile off and take
a shot at them." I got more volunteers
than I could use, chose eight from my company.
Colonel Butler said, "Mitch, dislodge those men."
I saluted and inquired of Captain Clark,
"What's your pleasure, Sir?" The Captain said,
"Kill the long-haired devils where you find them."

We pulled off our blue coats and haversacks,
advancing from the Pennsylvania line.
"Go get 'em, boys," said one. The Captain there
only shook his head: "You won't come back."
At the base of the rock two poor skirmishers
lay stone cold where the sharpshooters dropped them.
We crawled ahead, our pantaloons grey with dirt.

Then Tommy Wenn, a noble young churchgoer
from home, said, "I'll pass over," and ran up.
The skirmish line kept firing to make work
for the sharpshooters, so Tommy could pass.
We all passed over in like manner, I last,
and with good cover climbed up the hillside
a mile, came out to the sharpshooters' rear.

They fired at our reserves a mile away,
dropping bullets, as it were, from the clouds.
We advanced to spitting distance from the first
sharpshooter. I told Tommy Wenn, "You wait
till he lifts up to shoot, then fire at him."
Tommy got the first man with a clean shot
through the head. We had to lay the body

over the splattered brains to hide the sight.
Tommy stayed in the dead man's barricade
to shoot the ground at intervals and fool
the rebs while we went on to do the next.
We killed six in this fashion, with one left
atop a gulch. I took Jesse Peterson:
"Now Jesse, take your time, but you get him."

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Jesse lowered his rifle and said, "Lieutenant,
I'm afraid my gun won't reach him from here."
We went further, till Jesse found a rock
to rest his rifle on. He cocked the gun,
and just as the rebel's hairy head appeared,
Jesse let him have it. We didn't bother
to gather up that sorry soul's remains,

but took the first six rifles back to our lines.
The soldiers raised Tommy Wenn on their shoulders
and gave three cheers for Mitchell and his men.
The Colonel sent a dispatch bearing praise.
But while we did our job the rebel guns
blew up the roadside cliff two miles away,
killing some of General Garfield's staff.

I'd been in a shadow and I did not hear it.

Leaving Pomeroy

Mrs. Gresham:

Running away is something children do
and I was not a child. Though I ran out
those many nights, I always came back home
by dawn to see to it that Papa was fed
and help out Mama any way I could.
She used to tell me I should have my own life
and there were plenty of men about who'd do.

My sisters snatched up half the able men
in Pomeroy. Oh, I had offers—eight,
to be exact—but I had wanderlust
like some have measles; anyway, my brother
lived for the ranch and would take care of it,
so I made plans to see my parents settled
and strike out for the world all on my own.

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By 1900, Papa found the ranch
harder to manage. We bought the big house
in Pomeroy so we could take in boarders,
left the wheat and cattle in William's hands,
though Papa went back any day he could
to mend his fences or repair his tools
or just to wander in his memories.

Some people have no gift for growing old.
Though there were days Papa could hardly breathe,
the old cough coming back, his eyesight poor,
though his hair and beard had long been white,
he still had the bearing of a younger man
and thought himself a soldier, and so we
were forced to soldier with him all those years.

My sisters and I were quite small, like Mama,
with her brown hair and eyes, and some said we
were pretty, admiring our clothes and manners—
my parents made sure we were well-behaved—
and now with all the grandkids coming by
it seemed as if the Mitchells of Pomeroy
had justified their travels.

I was almost thirty. I had said no
enough to good men that my sisters thought
I hadn't a brain in my head. I helped
our Mama cook and clean for boarders, men
who came for harvest work, or to punch cows.
By autumn I had told them I was leaving.
Mama sat down, frozen, in the kitchen,

and that night I made dinner by myself.

*

She was ten years younger than our Papa was,
and a much sturdier Methodist than he—
she used to organize camp meetings back
in Illinois, and taught her children prayers.
The world we knew in childhood was all God's,

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but somehow as we grew God slipped away,
or didn't hold us as He used to do.

The war hurt Mama too. Her brother died,
no one knew just where, and after that
her father had no use for Southerners
and never spoke to one. Papa, of course,
loved people no matter who they were,
wanted every stranger in Pomeroy
to stay at the Mitchell house and hear him tell

his stories about escape from Libby Prison.
My parents were unlike each other in
the way they bore the burden of the past;
that day I took the train
I saw Mama cry for the first time ever;
Papa simply ordered me to write
and stood beside her, waving, as I left.

I see them both receding on the platform,
Papa in his suit and watch-chained vest,
Mama veiled as if for someone's funeral,
the whole town growing smaller till I saw
it wasn't a town at all, but a few trees
nestled in the grass of a great dry land
growing so much wider by the minute

that suddenly I feared what I had chosen.

Boyish War

Lt. Mitchell:

"All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys."
My daughter read that to me years ago—
Maggie, the one who left for California.
We weren't all boys. I was thirty-three

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and I knew older men in uniform.
But we fought like boys. You know what I mean.
We bragged and laughed when we weren't terrified.

And I saw schoolkids torn apart by bullets,
their heads bashed in by Confederate rifles.
And I saw Yankees do a thing or two
to make those people hate us all their lives.
But in those days I couldn't waste my pity
on men who broke our union.
There was a fire in me that made me fight.

Not anger—no, nothing like that old Greek,
Achilles, who we read about at school.
I don't think I could ever really hate,
or could even understand Abe Lincoln's cause.
He was from Illinois and he was ours,
and we elected him our President,
and when he asked for volunteers, I went.

*

We were the right flank at Chickamauga,
and never saw the center of the fight
where Longstreet charged a gap in the Union lines
to give his West Point roommate, Rosecrans, hell
at great cost to both sides—many thousands
killed, wounded or missing in two days—
and set the stage for Missionary Ridge.

After we killed the rebel sharpshooters,
my men and I stayed out on the high ground
for the view. We saw another old boy
in a butternut suit, dodging and shooting
half a mile off, but didn't have the heart
to do him in. He only had a shotgun
and didn't kill a living thing I saw.

Near sundown seven stands of rebel colors
moved toward us from the Chattanooga side.
In the confusion of our fight that day,

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as ranks were scattered and reformed in smoke,
the picture changed. I told my boys to move
back to the Pennsylvania skirmish line
as fast as their tired legs would carry them.

I told the Pennsylvania Colonel, "Sir,
there's seven stands of colors waving there.
They are for us, as we're inside their lines."
We found my Captain with the Illinois
telling the men stories under a tree.
In the dim light he asked, "Mitch, is that you?"
I passed him the bad news to give our Colonel.

Our order was to hold the rough terrain
at all hazards. The Army never thought
a second Lieutenant could get tired or hungry
and I was given charge of Company F
whose captain had been wounded in the morning.
I cast an eye for Charley, my colored man,
hoping he'd stayed arrears with our supplies,

but heard about his fate a few days later.

*

The land was full of hollows, broken fences,
and we were like regiments of blind men,
blades before us, poking for the enemy.
Suddenly we were firing at their lines.
When they fired back we ordered, "Down to cover!"
Damned if they didn't pass right over us.
I ordered the boys to change, front to rear.

When we raised up I saw that we were stuck
between two rebel battle lines. The boys
in gray came running up and shouted, "Captain,
hand us your sword."
"I can't see it that way,"
I said. A rebel parried, but one of mine
bayonetted him and was in turn thrust through
with a bayonet and dropped down at my feet.

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The fellow who called me Captain bled and moaned
and died pretty quick. Though I couldn't see
a damned thing, I sensed the fight was over.
I slipped my sword inside my pantaloons
so when they captured us I walked stiff-legged.
A rebel sergeant much in sympathy
asked me where I was hit and offered help.

I told him I fell off my horse and cracked my knee
and he said, "Suh, I b'lieve that hoss was shot."
Looking back, the whole thing seems unreal,
the way we walked along like two old friends.
Scattered shooting broke the night behind us,
though I could see that most of us were taken.
The rebels built a bonfire out of rails,

and in the firelight brought more prisoners in.
My Colonel hugged me like a baby, said,
"Mitch, you were worth your weight in gold today."
He said he knew that I could handle men
and would make Major if we could escape.
But we were told to sit down in the dark
and held at gunpoint all that weary night.

*

Next morning we were searched for valuables.
I hid my jackknife down inside my shoe;
a ring I made from California gold
I wrapped in tobacco, pretending it a chew.
The officer in charge strolled up to me
and said, "Now I will have to have that sword."
He waited, arms crossed upon his tunic.

I didn't want to be dishonorable.
General Hull in the Revolution, who
commanded two of my own ancestors, broke
his sword in the ground when taken prisoner.
"I'm not going to make a Hull of myself,"
I said, but made no move to give it up
and offered silence to this officer.

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It only made him madder. He detailed
three men with loaded pieces to take aim:
"Suh, I do not want to use harsh measures."
I saw those barrels pointed at my breast
and thought of Mrs. Mitchell and the baby,
saw my chance for escape would have to wait,
unbuckled my sword and handed it across.

I felt just like twenty-five cents. They asked
whether my name was on the sword. It was not.
They regretted that it could not be returned.
I wished I had given it to the rebel
sergeant who saved my hide the night before,
but now I had to watch this officer
replace his rusty saber with my own.

Then I felt like six-and-a-quarter cents.

The Country I Remember

Mrs. Gresham:

By the time the train pulled into Portland, I
knew there was no one who could save my life
but me. Now I was twenty-nine years old,
a spinster with a love of poetry
and no money, experienced at cooking.
Portland was a brick city on the river
with some degraded shanties for the poor.

Fishermen, lumberjacks and prostitutes,
bartenders and bankers rambled her streets,
and I saw quickly it was rougher than
the frontier village that my Papa knew.
And wet. I swear it rained all winter long,
the smell of fish and cut wood everywhere.
I spent a week just wandering the streets,

looking for work to pay for my hotel,

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but what could I do? I couldn't bring myself
to sing in a saloon with sawdust floors
or join the mission at the riverfront.
I saw that I had lived with family
to fortify me far too many years,
and I would have to learn to live alone.

The hotel keeper, Mr. Jenkins, must
have pitied me; he offered me a job,
first as kitchen help, then behind the desk
keeping his accounts. It paid my room and board
and something extra that I set aside—
my first Christmas away from home I sent
small presents to the folks in Pomeroy.

I had a private room on the first floor,
a bed and dresser and electric light
for reading so I didn't strain my eyes.
"It rains across the country I remember."
That was a line from Trumbull Stickney, read
in another room some other, later year,
but I remember feeling it in Portland,

closing my eyes and burrowing in the sheets
to listen to the water streaming down
the walls outside, the brick streets rushing
all that dark water downhill to the river
where it kept on going silently to sea
and clear across to China. I was alone.
I was alone and it was more than I could bear

to lie there listening to that driving rain.

*

Maybe that is why we go on talking,
always trying to show someone we're here,
and look—I have a past just like you do,
a stream of words that fills the empty night
and sweetens troubled dreams, or so we hope,
and tells us not to linger long on bridges
staring at all the water passing by.

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I thought my whole ambition was to make
the past and present come together, dreamed
into a vivid shape that memory
could hold the way the land possesses rivers.
They in turn possess the land and carry it
in one clear stream of thought to drink from
or water gardens with.

I learned that I must first talk to myself,
retelling stories, muttering a few
remembered lines of verse, to make the earth
substantial and to bring the sunlight back.
I thought of all the bones out on the prairie,
of Mrs. Kress who came aboard our train
in a tight corset, so my sister Beatrice

said she looked like an ant. I thought of land
that flowed far out beneath us like a river
turning the dead face-upward in the wake
to talk to us of all their ruined lives
in a Babel of tongues. And then I knew
I worked to keep these troubled dreams at bay
and keep the talking dead from drowning me.

"It rains across the country I remember."

*

When spring came, Mr. Jenkins offered me
employment of another kind—a ring
along with all the duties of a wife.
He'd put his best suit on when he proposed
and I could see why others might have faltered,
fearing nights alone, but I was expert
at saying no and hardly knowing why.

I told him I would move to California.

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Sojourners

Lt. Mitchell:

Someone told me that mankind always moves
from east to west, but in my day I've traveled
back and forth like a saw blade cutting wood.
When I was young I worked my father's farm,
but when at twenty-one I became a man
I left the farmwork and the biting flies
to drive an ox team out to Oregon.

That was back in 1852.
The journey took three months, a lot on foot.
I saw whole households strewn across the prairies,
all extra furniture discarded when
we reached the bluish foothills of the mountains.
We added graves to those beside the trail
and traded worn-out oxen as we went.

At Cheyenne we picked up new wagon ruts
and followed them northwest across the hills
until high forests closed us in, the trail
full of growth we had to cut with axes.
I'd never seen such streams—what the poet called
"The cataract of death far thundering from
the heights"—clean as Heaven, shot with rainbows.

I'd say the mountains raised my spirits up
more than any sermon ever did.
I met a man who wintered there and looked
a granite carving brought to life by magic.
Everywhere I went I wondered how
it looked before it fell to human eyes,
before some storyteller called it home.

The mountains were home only to the gods,
according to the Indians, and I,
well I was young and I believed so much
the world was mine for taking.

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At last we came
to Portland, a town of log cabins then.
Never was a land so full of rain—
the ground soaked it up and squished when you walked.

The sky was always like a tattered mist
and most days keeping dry was hard to do,
but the woods were full of game, the lakes of fish,
and you could feed yourself with hardly a sweat.
I met a man named Barley who would fish
the river with a gill net like the natives,
hauling in salmon half as big as a man.

Joe Barley had come from Massachusetts
not for gold, but because he had no life
to hold him in the east. I fished with him
one fall, learned how to build an alder fire
and keep the coals banked low to smoke the fish.
I said I'd travel south to California;
Barley had a notion of coming too.

We panned for gold on the Humboldt, cut wheat
with cradles in the Sacramento Valley
the hottest month I ever labored through.
We packed mules to prospect in the country
near Mount Shasta and were lost for three days.
We heard about the Indian fights up north
and how the Rogue and Klamath picked a fight,

then signed up with the Oregon Mounted Dragoons
in 1856. They made us Corporals
and I recall my horse was so damned slow
I was always catching up. That's how I missed
half the fight in the Siskiyou Mountains,
thick-wooded hills with lava outcrops,
where I saw Barley die, pierced by an arrow.

It wasn't more than three men we were chasing,
four months after Colonel Wright was murdered.
Some said Wright had raped an Indian girl,

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some that she was the one who ate his heart;
a few of our men were still hot for revenge.
Barley, who had ridden out in front,
was nearly dead of bleeding when we found him.

They'd taken his horse, left Barley in the sun
where we found him sitting up, swatting flies
and watching his own blood cover the grass.
"Mitch," he said, "I wish I'd stuck to fishing."
The Indians were hiding in the rocks.
Our men dismounted and were loading rifles,
shooting into the rocks, then running up.

The one they caught that day regretted it.
I was too busy holding my old friend
to notice all the noise on the hill above.
I must have looked up, though,
and when my eyes came back to Barley's face
the life had left it. I dug Barley's grave
and carved his name on a marker made of wood.

We had a preacher with us who could sermon:
"For we are strangers before thee," he said,
"and sojourners, as were all our fathers:
our days on the earth are as a shadow and
there is none abiding." He read some more
but those are the words that I remember most;
they made me miss the farm in Illinois.

I knew my father must be getting old.

*

I thought of sojourners in the train's darkness,
hauled with other Union men to Richmond.
I fretted about the way I lost my sword,
and the stench of packed-in men hardly helped.
There wasn't room to tend the wounded ones
whose moans, together with the chugging train,
dragged through our days and nights of traveling.

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The Chickamauga prisoners were kept
at Libby Prison down on Carey Street
near the James River and Lynchburg Canal,
a brick warehouse built to hold tobacco
where now a thousand Union officers
huddled on its upper floors and learned
to sleep like spoons when nights grew long and cold.

"Well, you'uns look like we'uns, quite a little."
That was our greeting from the reb commander,
pointing out his cannon aimed at the walls,
his soldiers eager to shoot all Yankees
attempting to escape. But I don't think
the man was evil; that night he fed us
beans and meat, never so much food again—

his men were hungry too, quite a little.

The Blacksmith

Mrs. Gresham:

Howard Gresham pried a "yes" from me
by sheer stubbornness. He was a strong man
and he simply wore me down. I'd lived alone
some years and thought I'd always live alone,
but fell for him as though I were a girl.
He wasn't a poet any more than I,
but he reminded me of some old verses:

"His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
  His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
  He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
  For he owes not any man."
Those were lines my Papa used to love.

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Howard was a real blacksmith for ten years
who worked his way out west from Minnesota.
When I met him he owned a dry goods store
in Santa Rosa, where I worked as a cook
in a restaurant. He had these strong arms
from wielding a heavy hammer all those years
and looked much like the fellow in the poem.

He'd come by the restaurant once and seen me
going in to work, and then he came back
and asked me on a picnic in the hills
outside of town. It was summer. "For, lo,
the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth. . . ." Those words
were dancing about in my head that day.

The hills of Santa Rosa had turned golden.
Sometimes they reminded me of the Palouse,
but winter wasn't hard in California.
I loved to take long walks outside of town,
so I said yes, and then I think I laughed
and said, "For, lo, the winter is past." Howard
knew the verse and finished speaking it.

Right there in the restaurant that drew me
to him in a way I'd never felt before.
He knew the verse, though he'd had little school
because his father died at Gettysburg
and he'd had to learn a trade. I said yes,
I'd join him on his picnic in the hills.
That night I thought about it; doubts came back.

I told myself my travels were not done.
I still had thoughts of Mexico and further
south if money hadn't slowed my progress.
I had an idea that I would write a book,
but I could never sit still long enough.
I hardly knew this man, but clearly saw
that I could settle down and live with him.

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No, I'd think, to marry him is to betray
yourself. Look at all the women you've known
who wear a path from house to school to church,
yoked like oxen, milked like cows, and told
to be as pretty as the foliage;
as if the noise of children's not enough
they nurse the manhood of their husbands too.

I ranted alone inside my rented room,
rejected Howard half a dozen times
when all he'd asked me was to go for a walk.
And when I tried to sleep I thought of love
and thought he would be capable of it.
And then: why would any man want me?
I'm an old maid, thirty-six years old!

The picnic was a Sunday I had off.
We dallied for a long time on the ridge,
talking about our fathers and the war
and what we hoped for, coming west. I thought
the kindness in his face was kindness earned
by hardship and a solitude like mine.
He was forty-five and still a bachelor,

kept from marriage by his work and travel.
His family were all dead but a sister
in Minnesota he wrote postcards to.
For our picnic he bought sandwiches and beer
and threw a blanket on the grass, and we
sat in the shade of a black elm and talked.
When he returned me to my room that night

I had a wire that told me Mama had died.

*

When you have gone away to help yourself,
a death at home is somehow more your fault,
as if you could have stopped it, made a mood

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of happiness that would keep death at bay.
But I had not seen Mama since the day
she shrank beside my Papa as the train
pulled out—my last view of her, after all.

The train back home ran through the corridor
of rain to Portland, then by the river east.
I have never grown used to trains going east,
but the hills were familiar, farms of wheat
and standing herds out in the heat of summer.
All of my sisters were there, kids and husbands
with them, my shy brother and his new bride,

and Papa, standing on the platform, still
like a soldier, erect, his thinning hair
covered by a hat that matched his suit—
Mama would have bought him that and made him
wear it in the sun. He must have thought
she would see him buried in that suit, and now
sudden disbelief showed in his gaunt face.

Some of my sisters stayed at William's ranch
and let their children ride the horses. Papa
wanted me at the house in town, and said
he'd like to hear me read to him again,
which of course I did: Whitman on the war,
Longfellow and Lowell and Trumbull Stickney—
he liked that line of Stickney's on the rain.

Weather for a funeral could not be found
at Pomeroy in summer: dusty blue
rose over the steeple and the grassy buttes.
"We brought nothing into this world, and it
is certain we can carry nothing out."
The minister was old, and his voice faint:
"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. . . ."

The rustle of children filled the wooden pews,
and I heard their shoes on the floor, tapping
and scraping the Lord's floorboards, and I thought,

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This is life going on, this is the form
of memory, the way our voices will remain.
I have avoided life too many years.
I have wanted to disappear, and now

at last I am ready for my life to come.

Rat Hell

Lt. Mitchell:

The winter of 1863 and 4
was hard on all the men in Libby Prison.
Men from Gettysburg and Chickamauga
huddled on the upper floors, but when
we cooked or had our dead to carry down
the rebs let us tarry on the ground floor.
By Christmas we were planning our escape.

Maybe you've heard of Colonel Rose's tunnel.
I was one of the fifteen men who dug,
sworn to an oath we would not tell the others
for fear the word would spread. If officers
escaped we might release the thirty thousand
private soldiers on Belle Isle, and then march
any way we could for the Union lines.

It was almost more than I could do to wait.

*

I knew a Sergeant Brown of the 25th
Virginia, came on duty at midnight, who
gave us tobacco and a morning paper.
A few years ago in Wallace, Idaho,
I met a lady in a bank who said,
"Lieutenant Mitchell, my father's an old soldier.
I want you two old veterans to meet."

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I was in Wallace visiting a daughter.
One night this lady brought her father by
and I thought him familiar by his bearing,
and he said, "Yes, Lieutenant Mitchell, I
have given you tobacco many a time.
I was near court-martialled once for giving
a flask of whiskey to one of your wounded men."

If it wasn't Sergeant Brown! I visited
his home, and several old Confederates
came by, and we had a wonderful time.
We had a Southern meal there in Idaho,
then cigars, and Sergeant Brown's daughter played
old songs we all knew on the piano,
as if no war had ever come between us.

*

There was a basement in the Libby Prison
called "Rat Hell," which was where we tunneled from.
In the Chickamauga Room we loosened floorboards,
slipped into the first-floor kitchen at night
and made a hidden hole behind a cookstove.
One of the men had rope and fixed a ladder,
sailor fashion, for us to climb down on.

We dug from the east wall of Rat Hell,
hoping to make it past a vacant lot
to a shed attached to a towing company,
our one tool the knife I'd hid in my shoe,
a knife that still remains in my possession,
broken and mended, worn toothpick thin.
A hundred men depended on it once.

While digging, we could hear the guard above
in the lot call, "Three o'clock and all is well,"
and had to keep from laughing, though the work
was rough and men who dug were all half sick
from the stink of the box sewer next to us.
By day we kept a watchman concealed in ricks
the rebs had stacked below, and all day long

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that fellow felt the rats run over him
and gnaw his flesh. One fellow used my knife
to kill a rat and baked it nice and brown
and said he never tasted sweeter meat,
it was just as good as squirrel.
Once the tunnel
broke a small hole into the vacant lot,
so I crawled in to see what could be done.

I'm telling you, to crawl under the earth,
smelling a stink that nearly made you sick,
inching yourself along by pulling roots
and wriggling like a worm inside a grave,
you can't lie still to think of smothering
but let your mind go blank and concentrate
on the job, like a piece of carpentry.

When I poked through to moonlight in the lot,
wearing the burlap sack we used for work
to spare our uniforms, I knew at once
I had to hide that hole. I scraped some mud
from the ground above and packed it with my blade,
making the airshaft look like a rat burrow—
so I hoped. Anyway, they never found us.

But I came out all mud from head to foot,
knowing I had caught a chill. Captain Clark
and Major Hamilton helped clean me up.
I donned my uniform and climbed upstairs;
by the time I found my blanket I was sick,
my skin all clammy and my forehead hot,
and knew that I had been that sick for days.

*

I had bad dreams (and I am not a man
who dreams) of water boiling up from down
below, a shaft of moonlight turning it
to blood. I dreamed of cannonfire. One. Two.
The guns pounded like that. One. Two. Three. Four.
I saw my first-born buried on the farm
and prayed that I would live to see my wife.

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I started coughing blood out of my lungs.
The rebel doctor said I had pneumonia;
when I heard that I thought I was a goner,
tried to sleep and stop the dreams from coming,
but when your fever's high like that, the mind
plays tricks on you. My breath came in great heaves
and the strangest dreams kept floating in my head.

The night they finished digging I recall
a dream of Mrs. Mitchell. As you know
she liked to keep things neat, and in my dream
she said I looked a mess. "Now Mitch," she said,
"you straighten out or I won't marry you."
I tell you, the woman never looked so fierce.
She frightened me so much I had to live.

"Now Mitch." It was the voice of Colonel Rose,
the night of February 9th. The boys
had thrown their blankets down by me, he said.
"Now Mitch, this is good-bye. I hate to leave
a man behind, but you know we can't wait."
He looked a kindly bear with his great beard,
and I said I was glad to see them go.

*

More than a hundred men escaped that night.
The rebs arrested their own guards, and would
have shot the bunch of them, but someone found
the tunnel. They made a Negro boy crawl through
and saw where he came out inside the shed.
When they assembled all the men to count,
I was carried down cocooned in blankets,

and carried back, still moaning in my dreams.

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The Children's Hour

Mrs. Gresham:

This morning on the radio I heard
a robbery on Rosecrans Avenue
in Hawthorne got some old gentleman killed,
all for fifty dollars. And then I thought,
"Rosecrans Avenue," and it all came back,
how my Papa had fought in Rosecrans' army
at Chickamauga in 1863.

And when I was a girl I used to sneak
into the grown-ups' room, invisible
behind a chair, and listen to his stories.
Before he died a fellow wrote them down.
I have them in a box somewhere, with all
the letters Howard sent when we were courting
in Santa Rosa after Mama died.

No one ever wrote down Mama's stories.
And here we are in 1954.
I'm the last of the Mohicans, just about.
Ida died not long after Papa did.
Beatrice died in 1922.
William was killed by a horse in 1930.
Agnes died in a car wreck in Seattle.

Olive's living still in Pomeroy
and likes to call me on the telephone
to ask about the weather. She came down
to visit not long after Howard died
and went to see the houses of the stars.
My nieces and nephews are all grown up
and like to see Aunt Maggie in L.A.

They say to grow old without children is
a curse, and sometimes I believe it's true—
to have so much to say and no one here

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to say it to. I have a niece who comes
and takes me for a drive out by the sea
and shows me how the city's spreading out
clear to the mountains.
When we first came here

the place seemed almost as wild as Big Sur.
Howard had the store in Bakersfield
till 1928 when he retired
and we moved to Inglewood. All those years
we saw our chances for a family
go by until there was no chance at all.
Our baby didn't live beyond four months.

I tried to summon up my old belief
or find some verse that would relieve the pain,
but life won't always come when it is called.
We heard about the store in Bakersfield
and Howard saw the move would do us good
and I said, "Yes, my people always move
when staying in one place is killing them."

In Inglewood we used to have a shop
where we sold flowers, and I remember watching
young men stammer over roses for their girls
and thinking maybe I had let it all
go by too quickly. I had some regrets,
wondering if old age would be as dry
and dusty as the hills.

Depression, war, rations and hard times.
Howard wouldn't let me dwell in the dark.
That's what we had work and laughter for,
he said, to pull us out and land us on
our feet, and keep our dead from sinking us.
He was like Papa in that way, knowing
always how to plant his feet on the ground.

*

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The other day my niece, Alyssa, brought
her two young girls along and we had dinner
near Pacific Avenue, then drove out
to the beach where the girls could have a swim.
They were such lovely things, with their long hair
and much more freedom than I ever knew,
the way they flirted with the boys out there.

Alyssa rambled on about her job
selling real estate after her divorce,
and while I listened, all at once I heard
the hoofbeats of the surf come pounding in.
I thought it was the voice of memory
crashing and flowing down across the earth,
and underneath, like roots that probe for water,

and I was moved by everything that moved.

Eighty Acres

Lt. Mitchell:

In 1866 my son was born,
William Thomas, partly named for the Rock
of Chickamauga. My father, getting old,
wanted me to stay on and care for him,
so I built a good frame house next to his
and worked our eighty acres in Edgar County,
and raised my children up with Mrs. Mitchell.

We'd cattle and fowl, corn and timothy.
The children walked two miles to school, and had
a fine teacher who taught them proper speech.
I like people, as you know. Anyone
passing by was invited in to dinner.
One time a wall-eyed man and his daughter passed
and stayed for three years, helping on the farm.

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The daughter taught my girls to sing folk songs:
"Froggie Went A-Courting," "Little Brown Jug."
In 1876 my uncles came
to see my father once before he died.
He was ninety then, but when they came
he rose from bed he was so glad to see them.
My father died in 1878.

Mother had passed on twenty years before.
I was damned near fifty myself, and saw
it might be my last chance to move out west.
This country's always on the move. Sometimes
if you don't want to carry a great weight
you drop it and walk away. America
is made by those who want to change themselves—

my father did the same when he came out
from Boone County, Kentucky, years before.
Now my wife was thirty-nine, but healthy.
We sold the farm with all our furniture
at auction, tools I sometimes wish I'd kept,
loaded up our five daughters and one son
and took the train from Paris, Illinois.

That was the last my wife saw of her folks.

*

They kept me seven months in Libby Prison,
part of the time so sick I thought I'd die,
the rest malnourished, hardly able to walk.
The rebs recaptured nearly half the men
who crawled out through the tunnel. Some they kept
below in cages where they fed on rats.
The whole business was a bit discouraging.

The more the war went on the meaner it got,
and we were glad to hear the Union guns
start in on Richmond. One day a reb guard
came upstairs where we were sitting, and said,

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"What are you boys doing?" He looked half-crazed.
I told him that as far as I could tell
we were prisoners of war. He was new,

just a kid, looking at us lying there:
"You fellas ever get anything to eat?"
I said we had a ration every day
and it was pretty good but not enough.
There was a bucket of beans and some cornbread
brought up, and the boy looked at it and said,
"Is that the kind of stuff you have in here?"

He said he wouldn't touch it for it was full
of worms. I told him, "I don't see the worms."
I ate my ration, but the rebel boy
wouldn't eat. Next day I guess he was hungry
and he said he couldn't see the worms either.
The Confederates there ate the same rations
we did, just like they were prisoners too.

*

A whole mess of new prisoners arrived,
but Richmond was done for. They lined us up
outside, where I stood a while in the shade.
A chaplain came up and said, "Lieutenant Mitchell,
why don't you fall in line?" I said the ground
was too rough for me to walk upon. "Why,"
he said, "it's level as a floor out here."

But to me the whole city seemed to wobble.

*

They shipped us first to Macon, Georgia, then
to the jailyard in Charleston, South Carolina
where we saw the Union batteries lobbing shells
into the burning city; so they pulled us out,
giving us rice and cabbage leaves to eat,
to a place called Camp Sorghum, near Columbia.
I don't mind telling you conditions there were bad.

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More sick and crippled men I'd never seen,
and many died. Some days I felt oppressed.
It seemed that if we stayed there we would die.
When I think back to all those muddy graves,
sometimes I recall a line of poetry
my daughter read to me: "O how can it be
that the ground does not sicken?"

The world was sick and winter on its way.

*

Maybe the rebs were just too tired to watch us.
One night half a dozen of us bolted,
struck out across a field that once had been
full of cotton, for you could see the rows,
and into trees that scattered water on us.
It was damn foggy and we ran all night
only to find we'd circled back to camp!

So we started the opposite way and came
to a house with a lady out fetching water.
One of the men had a grey suit and went
to her and said he was Confederate,
and she said, "I will divide what I have
with a Confederate soldier," and gave
him biscuits which he carried back to us.

While he was in the house a sow came by
with four or five pigs. I was accurate
with a rock, but I threw and threw at those pigs
and never hit a one. I couldn't see
distinctly any more from months of hunger.
We walked at night without a star for guide
till we saw there was someone on the trail:

a Negro came along on his way back
to a camp where he was working as a cook.
We told him we were Yanks and he was scared
but said, "God bless," and took us to his cabin.

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His people there had little food, but gave us
bacon and cornbread, let us get some sleep.
They said we had been moving south and might

catch up with General Sherman at Augusta,
sixteen miles away. For men as tired
and worn out as we were, that was good news.
In all my rambling days I never felt
a sixteen miles so distant. We left at daybreak
so we could see our route across a swamp,
threw our shoes away as they were almost gone,

and made ourselves some moccasins from the hide
of a dead cow we found mired in the mud.
But we would never make it to Augusta.
We ran straight into a rebel picket line
where Morgan's men were shouting, "Halt. Halt. Halt."
One was so excited his rifle shook
at us and I thought he would shoot. He said,

"Give us fair play, Yankees, give us fair play."

*

This is an account of my experience,
though much is left out: the end of the war
and sorry death of Mr. Lincoln, months
in hospitals spent getting my strength back,
return to Edgar County, Illinois,
where Mrs. Mitchell, who had had no news
for quite a time, was glad to see me home.

I had little enough to show her for
the trouble of my being gone. The sword
I bought in Washington for the last parade
was not as fine as the one that I had lost
at Chickamauga. She told me our first-born
died while I was gone. No one knew the cause
and she had kept her grief for my return.

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I've told these tales before, but wanted someone
to set them properly on paper, now,
in case my mind in old age starts to drift.
They say that when you age the distant things
are closest, and some days I find that true.
Sometimes I think of Oregon and young
Joe Barley, and the lonely way he died.

Sometimes I think of all the blood we've spilled,
but thinking that way only brings bad dreams.
It's good to have the young ones coming by
for visits, though Maggie never had her own
and she's still living out in California.
Mrs. Mitchell died twelve years ago.
It came sudden. The doctor said a stroke.

Forty-eight years together, she and I,
and most of it was work. A fellow can't
put into words the help she gave us all.
Not only the children. There were bad days
when glumness got the better of me, she said,
"Mitch, you've come too far to give up now."
I talk a lot, but some things I can't say.

I'm getting used to living here in town.
This is my home. This is my home because
I say it is. I told you about my life
so you would know how this place is my home.
I knew I'd come back like a boy in love
and build my wife that frame house, room by room.
I knew that one of us would choose a grave.

And I will rest there when my time has come.

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GEORGE WATSON

The Art of Disagreement: C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)

I first encountered C.S. Lewis on a lecture-platform in Oxford in 1948; and I was only there, as I vividly recall, because I had been told not to go.

To study at Oxford is to listen to benevolent advice about lectures, among other matters, from a college tutor. Mine was a young man of radical views who had little confidence in Lewis, who was then, as he remained, a highly controversial figure. His implacable conservatism, during the postwar socialist government headed by Clement Attlee, hardly mattered, since Oxford thought its own affairs easily more interesting than national politics. But he had recently engineered the election of an obscure chaplain from his own college, which was Magdalen, into the chair of poetry, and against the nomination of a reputable scholar called E.K. Chambers, in a coup not lightly forgiven; and his lectures on medieval and Renaissance literature, which were European in scope, were thought by some too wide-ranging to be helpful. They might even confuse me. "If I hear you are going to Lewis," my tutor said, "I shall have serious doubts about you." So I went.

The event was in many ways a surprise. For one thing, there was an enormous audience. For another, the short, stocky figure on the platform looked less like a wit than a pork butcher of hearty disposition with a loud, booming voice. The voice was used in unexpected ways. Instead of talking fast and soft, which was the Oxford mode, Lewis talked loud and slow, on or off a platform, in a deep velvety tone. You could have taken dictation from his lectures, and some (including myself) did. I still have the notebook based on his "Prolegomena to Medieval Literature" and "Prolegomena to Renaissance Literature"—Lewis knew Greek as well as Latin, and loved exotic English words based on Greek—and after nearly half a century I find

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my notes set out, like the lectures themselves, in a severely segmented way, with numbered sections divided into lettered subsections and still smaller subsections. That was the first thing I ever learned from him: that even ideas can be tidied up to look like a salad rather than a stew. He hated mishmash. "The very seas would lose their shores" was a quotation from Ovid he was fond of, and he was much given to dividing ideas and keeping them apart. "*Distinguo*" was a favorite word of warning, accompanied by a raised forefinger. The perennial philosophy of Aldous Huxley he used to deride by saying, "Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism." Lewis thought ideas should have space around them to breathe; he was instinctively suspicious of easy reconciliations. In fact he once declined to contribute to a festschrift I edited for Basil Willey, *The English Mind* (1964), on the highly principled ground that philosophy and literary criticism should be kept apart. In the courteous letter in which he declined, I need hardly say, he quoted Ovid in the original.

His expositions were above all lucid, but it was only years after hearing him lecture that I realized how that lucidity had been achieved. I remember calling on him in the early sixties, as a Cambridge colleague, while he was writing *The Discarded Image* (1964), working with a steel pen dipped in ink. That seemed symbolic of the book. He handed me the lecture-notes for his Prolegomena, out of which he was composing, and as I nervously turned the pages of a battered little notebook under his watchful eye—it was a very intrusive act I was performing, after all—I saw that it was laid out in sections and subsections on the left-hand side, with the right-hand side neatly peppered with quotations from the medieval schoolmen and early modern authors like Shakespeare, Bacon and Sir Thomas Browne, culled from his reading over several decades. It was a moment that taught me a lot about scholarly method: a pocket notebook one could travel with, with headings on the left and accumulated instances on the right; and as I came away I realized there was no other way by which such lectures could have been assembled.

Writing was Lewis' life, in the sense that he was always writing when he was not doing anything else. He was endowed with whatever it is that is the opposite of a block; and his books,

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including the posthumous collections, easily outnumber the years he lived, which were sixty-five. "Have you never found it difficult to write?" I once asked; and he looked puzzled, his answer suggesting that the question had not been altogether understood. "Sometimes," he said, "when I come back in the evening after dinner, I tell myself I am too tired and shouldn't write anything. But I always do." So putting prose on paper was a profound addiction. The most articulate being I have ever known, he loved to talk about the sheer mechanics of turning thoughts into sentences. "I find I want to begin every paragraph with 'It would be difficult to exaggerate . . . ,' so to break myself of the habit I am going to start the next paragraph with 'It would be difficult to exaggerate, but I'm going to have a jolly good try.' " Writing was so much a mode of life that you felt that his highly deliberated utterance, in conversation as well as in lectures, had been progressively achieved by pacing his thought down to the speed of longhand writing. After all, I never knew him when he was young. He may once have been a quick-talking youth.

Perhaps, before I go further, I should make an avowal of a modest and personal kind. Though I loved Lewis, I could not without presumption call him a friend, since he was almost thirty years older than myself. Nor did we share many opinions or daily habits. As a colleague in Cambridge, to which I moved in 1959, five years after he did, he advised me cheerfully on arrival about where to take country walks; but we both preferred to take them alone. He sometimes urged me to join him in drinking draught Guinness at the Pickerel, a pub opposite Magdalene College, where before he lost health and appetite he found high table dinners too late; and I regret to this day I never went—out of an indifference to stout, it should be said, never to his company. "A very good drink," he assured me warmly—it was the only Irish thing I ever noticed about him—and I only wish I could have agreed with him.

But there are more important matters than drink. Lewis was a Christian conservative from around the age of thirty, which is to say before I knew him; and since I am neither one nor the other, there was never any question of a doctrinal influence. If I was not exactly a friend, still less was I a disciple. That in no

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way altered my sense of admiration and affection. He was much given to writing and uttering witty homilies embodying views I respected rather than shared, and this proved an embarrassment to neither of us, since we both thrived on dissent. In fact I doubt if he would have known what to do with agreement, any more than I would. That is not an attitude I owe to him, since I have always held it: that the stuff of good conversation is polite and animated disagreement. The best teacher I ever had, and the best colleague, he did not ask or expect me to share his convictions. It is a point to return to.

Oxford was a cold, hungry place after 1945, and my chief contact with Lewis was not in classrooms but at evening meetings, for the simple reason that poverty made it hard to heat a room. Life in England before central heating was dominated by a coin-box attached to a gas-fire, and a lack of coins could drive you out on winter evenings, and even on autumn and spring evenings, to societies like the Socratic Club. It was there that I really came to know Lewis. He was the president of a body which, despite its pagan name, was undoubtedly Christian in impulse; and its organizing secretary, a formidable South African spinster called Stella Aldwinkle, who was rumored to be writing an unfinishable thesis about divine providence, was a passionate advocate of something she called Advanced Adult Theism. I never discovered what that was; but I discovered, as I sat by the fire, a good deal else. The Club justified itself by keeping me warm, and it justified its name by Lewis' behavior in it.

He, at least, was Socratic, though a Socrates with a sense of fun. One evening Miss Aldwinkle read the minutes and asked if they might be signed as an accurate account of the last meeting, and all hands went obediently up, including Lewis'. She rounded on him. "How, Mr. Lewis, can you express an opinion about the truth of the minutes when you were not present at the last meeting?" "That, my dear," said Lewis, "is because your reading has transformed my concept of the truth itself." The main business of the meeting, however, was desperately earnest, and was usually concerned with a large moral issue; and if Lewis did not read the paper himself, he was often the first to speak in discussion. His manner might be described as politely merciless. I am now possessed of more philosophical understanding than I then had, and realize with hindsight that

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I was listening to a highly individual hodgepodge of Victorian positivism, which Lewis had imbibed as a boy from a Scottish tutor in Surrey—he has told the story in his memoir *Surprised by Joy* (1955)—and then partly or largely rejected; with it came the remains of an Hegelian training as an Oxford undergraduate and the Christianity of a convert, with all a convert's passion for analysis and self-examination. No dogmatic stone was to be left unturned, nor did he have any use for unexamined propositions. His interventions were often directed against false reasons for true belief, and it hardly mattered if such reasons were advanced by believers or non-believers. "That is not why I believe in such-and-such" was a characteristic opening. He was endlessly counter-suggestible. "That is not why I became a Christian," I recall his saying once. "When I was studying philosophy in Oxford, German Idealism was the thing, and it sometimes bordered on solipsism or mere self-exploration. We were often warned against that. Do not go down that dark tunnel. So I went down it, and found God."

To know Lewis as a teacher was to know him as a colleague, and I never observed any difference in his behavior to old or young. Questions of inequality hardly arose, since his interest was in a point made or not made, not in whoever had made it. I can only speak from personal experience, but my sense of him was that he was interested in what you said rather than in you. When he sat on the committee that appointed me to lecture in Cambridge in 1959, we had a delightful conversation in his college room, which was as Spartan and uninteresting as the one in Oxford. One hardly associated him with a visual sense, except for landscape. The first thing you saw, as you entered, was an ancient battered bathtub standing abruptly in the middle of a tiny hallway, and the only decoration I recall in his sitting-room was a cheap reproduction over the mantelpiece of Michelangelo's creation of Adam from the Sistine Chapel. "I am in a Warburgian state of mind," he would explain sonorously, meaning he had acquired a sudden interest, in the style of the Warburg Institute, in the connections between Renaissance poetry and painting through rereading Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In an interview at which he was supposed to form an opinion about appointing me to lecture—our first meeting in

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several years—he appeared wholly indifferent to that question, which was not even mentioned, but highly interested in a story I had just read in a newspaper. In 1959 a magistrate who had harshly sent a poor widow to gaol for secretly doing part-time work while drawing a state benefit had died a day or two later of a heart attack, his sudden death being represented in the London tabloids as an act of God; and Lewis slapped his thigh appreciatively when he heard it, though it had been headline news for several days, and exclaimed "That illustrates something I have always believed—that it is no use reading newspapers. If anything interesting happens, someone will always tell you about it." I do not imagine the incident had any bearing on my appointment, which in fact I cannot explain on any ground whatever. As I left the room with the Faculty chairman, I heard him remind Lewis of the meeting of the appointments committee a few days later. "I don't have to bother with that, do I?" Lewis said mildly. "Oh yes, you must come, Clive, you must," said the chairman. Appointments are notoriously that part of academic administration that academics take seriously—sometimes too seriously—but by the age of sixty Lewis had lost his taste for such matters. "How can people get interested in such things?" he asked me reproachfully a year or two later, when I told him I was on my way to Oxford to vote in the election of a Chancellor of the university. He had left all such enthusiasms far behind him.

His twin passions by then, apart from literature itself, were people and arguments, but he did not often make the mistake of confusing them. Good people can believe in wicked things, as the present century has abundantly proved with idealistic doctrines like race war and class war. Lewis could be polite, even friendly, to such people. What aroused his trenchancy was evil opinion. A capitalistic robber baron, he once told J.B.S. Haldane, the Communist scientist who had acclaimed the Soviet Union for abolishing Mammon, is at least better than an Inquisitor, since greed is easier to satisfy than dogmatic certainty; "Men do not become tyrants in order to keep warm" was a favorite dictum of Aristotle on his lips. He believed in democracy and private enterprise for the most grudging of all reasons: though they are much less than good, every other system is worse. One Cheer for Democracy might have been his

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slogan. He had once lived unhappily as a school boarder, he told Haldane, in "a world from which Mammon was banished" and where favors were gained by cringing servility or brute force. "It was the most wicked and miserable I have yet known." The analogy between communism and an unreformed boarding school is instructive, but the point is potent without being offensive; it is about communism, not about a Communist called Haldane. Lewis reviled many dogmas but seldom, to my knowledge, those who held them. Perhaps his most astringent remark, which I know only by report, was made about Attlee during his premiership, but then it should be remembered that it was made by somebody who never read a newspaper and was proud of it. "It cannot be doubted that Mr. Attlee is an agent of the Devil."

The limits of his malice were reached quickly, however, in conversation, by a wry smile and an agreement to differ. He was not wholly displeased to recall an incident at the high table of an Oxford college when an American visitor, mistaking the political historian A.J.P. Taylor for the art historian he had expected to sit with, repeatedly discountenanced him with questions about the history of art. "Don't know anything about it," Taylor replied, a sturdy Philistine, in increasing exasperation. Not that Lewis' dislike for everything Taylor stood for can ever have been in any doubt. Or vice versa. They were like chalk and cheese. "Lewis never talked about religion in the college," Taylor once acidly remarked. "We didn't want to hear it, for one thing."

When Lewis came to a chair of medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge in 1954—a post he was the first to hold, and which he had accepted on the second offer at Tolkien's insistence—he found a school of English dominated by no single figure, as I.A. Richards had come near to dominating it before his emigration to Harvard in 1939, but rather one racked by conflicting heresies almost as bitter as those of the early Church. The chief heresiarch was F.R. Leavis, who was three years older than Lewis and belonged to the place by birth as well as by election. His cult then stood at its highest; he was Cambridge English personified. The two men had next to nothing in common, but it is worth putting on record that they were always courteous to each other, and in a manner so elaborate that when they sat on committees one was reminded

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of the formality of a tea party before the First World War. This was Edwardian decorum at its best, and both men belonged to a generation for whom courtesy in that style was a mark of distance. Lewis in those days was supposed to represent the past, Leavis the future; and nobody would have guessed, nearly half a century on, that Leavis would be an all-but-forgotten name and Lewis the object of a vast and ever-increasing international cult. That would no doubt have surprised Lewis, and Leavis still more.

I never heard Lewis speak ill of Leavis, but then he plainly preferred not to speak about him at all. It is clear he found little virtue in his writings, and the high-minded priggery of that kind of agnostic mind was never to his taste. "Oughtn't the word 'serious' have an embargo slapped on it?" he once proposed to Kingsley Amis; instead of meaning the opposite of comic, he complained, it had come to mean good, or "literature with a capital L." It is easy to guess whom he was thinking of. I once asked him directly what he thought of Leavis. He looked very grave, as if fearful of being quoted; and then, in a half-mocking tone, he said in a low voice: "I think he's saved." I asked why. "Because," he replied with what appeared to be complete gravity, "he isn't interested in money." "So you think you may meet at the Last Judgement?" I asked, steering us out of embarrassment. "If our names on that occasion are taken in alphabetical order, yes," he said, and the exchange broke up in a laugh.

To his colleagues, myself included, Lewis was endlessly kind. His successor-but-one, John Stevens, has told how, as a young Fellow of Magdalene with medieval interests, he felt it was high time he learnt Old as well as Middle English; Lewis agreed with him and devoted a whole evening of every week for a term to reading Anglo-Saxon together. In conversation his dissent, though forthright, was polite, and all the more formidable for an exceptional memory. He did not admire the novels of Henry James as much as some did, and when asked if he did not even like *The Portrait of a Lady*, he replied "Don't you think there is something absurd about the tea-party conversation in the first chapter?" and then quoted it from memory. He did not always persuade, and may not always have wanted to persuade; much of what he said smacked of a spot-the-fallacy test. But he always had his reasons and knew how to deploy them, and they were backed by a formidable literary memory that included prose as

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well as verse. I remember, with gratitude, the letters he sent me about a book I had just written called *The Literary Critics* (1962). I still have them; and they still strike me, as they did then, as models of a critical engagement at once devastating and urbane. Perhaps it is fortunate that he was charming, all things considered, since his fondness for the put-down could be alarming. I once told him, as he was about to read a paper on Jane Austen, that I did not know he was a Janeite. "That is rather like saying that somebody who likes bread-and-butter is a bread-and-butterite," he snapped back. There was no answer to that. I have still not thought of an answer to that.

His intellectual life was far odder than has yet been realized, and in a recent book, *Critical Essays on C.S. Lewis* (1992), I have tried to explain why. He was only partly a coterie man, though he belonged to a literary group called the Inklings that included Charles Williams, down to his early death in 1945, J.R.R. Tolkien and Owen Barfield. But with all his faculty for friendship, Lewis was seemingly self-sufficient, or as nearly so as a human being can be: he enjoyed company, that is, but you never felt he needed it. Like Tolkien, he never visited the United States. The world came to him. When you visited him in Cambridge, in his college room, he would greet you warmly and talk enthusiastically; but he had laid down his pen to do so, and you did not doubt he had lifted it again before you had left the room. His love for his American wife, Joy Davidman, in his last years was touching; but when he invited me to lunch in Cambridge, on one of her rare visits, it was not quite as I had expected.[1] I have lived in New York among Jewish intellectuals, and there is a stereotypical instance of one in the film just made about their marriage called *Shadowlands*. What I met was a frail, distinguished, soft-spoken being, supporting herself on two sticks—above all a woman of letters. There was nothing brash about her. In fact Lewis was noisier than she, by far. Perhaps I too was surprised by Joy, on the only occasion I met her. I am certainly surprised by what filmmakers have made of her.

In many ways Lewis was a man out of sequence. He had fought as an adolescent in the First World War, on the western front—it was an experience he spoke of, if at all, only in muted

[1] Lewis continued to live in Oxford as a Cambridge professor. His wife naturally lived in Oxford, too, but occasionally accompanied him to Cambridge.

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horror—but he had no other direct acquaintance with the dire events of the century, and the war seems to have done little more than confirm his dislike of foreign travel, though he was a master of languages, modern as well as ancient. This paralleled his intellectual interests. His contact with Freud and Marx, for example, was purely adversarial. Nor was he a party man—merely a conservative in a general sense of the term—and though an Anglican he disdained distinctions like High and Low. Intellectual fashion existed only in order to be tested and refuted. He was almost the only being I have ever known who read the great Italian epics, like Ariosto and Tasso, as a private diversion, and his academic pursuits were out of sequence in a similar way. He pursued narrative theory as early as the 1940s, in some notable papers posthumously collected in *Of This and Other Worlds* (1982), at a time when no other critic in the Western world, to my knowledge, was pursuing the matter at all. But I have never heard him called a critical threorist, and we are only now emerging from a period of intense interest in literary theory which treated him as if he never existed. He was fascinated by meter as few are or were, and once told me proudly that a French critic had commended him for an interest, unique among Anglo-Saxons, in the formal properties of literature. His contribution to response-theory, as it came to be called after his death, never struck me as one of his more rewarding concerns, but he proposed something rather like it as early as 1939 in *The Personal Heresy*, a controversy with E.M.W. Tillyard, seven years before Wimsatt and Beardsley published a celebrated article on the intentional fallacy in *The Sewanee Review*; and he pursued his strange and (I think) misguided vendetta against authorial intention years later in *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961). It is characteristic of his after-reputation that modern response-theorists pay no attention whatever to these works, no doubt because his fame as a nostalgic, an enemy of Modernism, would have made him a damaging and unfashionable ally. We think of theory as avant-garde, and he was never that. He did not even share the views of friends like Tolkien in matters concerning literature or religion, or not always, being content to understand the fruitful nature of their disagreements. That is a world away from the narrow dogmatizing of other theorists before and since.

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But then agreement would have spoiled the game, and Lewis in debate tried to keep disagreement going for as long as he reasonably could, and sometimes for longer. If I were ever to be asked what I learned from him, that would be my reply: the art of disagreement. It is hard for me, by now, to disentangle his mind from mine. I loved argument before I knew him, but knowing him helped me to pursue it with firmer purpose and better grace. His mind, unlike his figure, was elegant, as if he used language to compensate for other lacks. "He makes every occasion so agreeable," I remember another Cambridge colleague, L.J. Potts, remarking with emphasis when I mentioned his name. He had vigor without venom; he was generous.

Perhaps his shade can still teach, since heresy-hunting has not vanished from academic life with the demise of Leavis' *Scrutiny* or the fading of Marxism. Extravagant phenomena like radical feminism and political correctness will no doubt go the way of Leavis and of Marx—"With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder"—but there is still enough of a steady, sober diet of intolerance to disquiet. It seems to be widely assumed, that is to say, that to extol an author is to endorse his views; often, over the years, I have been earnestly assured on praising a work that it was wrong about this or wrong about that. Some years ago—to give an instance—on announcing a course of lectures on George Orwell, I was told by more that one colleague that I labored under a regrettable illusion, since Orwell had been mistaken. The notion that a mistake might be worth discussing is still not part of the common wisdom of the age. (The proposition is not reversible, by the way, and I do not mean to imply that all mistakes are worth discussing, or that only mistakes are.) It is still not as widely understood as it deserves to be that we *need* bad arguments, if only because without bad arguments there would be no good ones.

Tolerance in that style, or any other, can easily be derided as facile or woolly. Lewis made it harder to do that. No one who knew him, no one who has read him, could think him facile or woolly. He knew truth mattered. His mind was tough. That he could draw so freely on the affection of those who disagreed with him, among many others, is the tribute he deserves above all to be paid.

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PETER MAKUCK

Costly Habits

Kurt was running out of things to do and clacked about the house like a bean in a box. From the kitchen window, he peeked at the box trap under the oak, its new wire glinting with promise. Now and then squirrels landed on his roof with a slap, a sharp sound that was close to insult. The close branches of an oak held six gray squirrels that seemed to be studying him. Shoe polish in hand, he counted them, six, before the hospital helicopter came low overhead and sent them scattering.

On the top step of the porch, with a dime, he levered open a can of black polish. The lid was shiny as a mirror inside. Kurt could see his dark hair, parted as if with a straight edge. Spitting on the folded rag, he dabbed polish, and rubbed it carefully into the leather of his tasseled loafers, one section at a time—something he did every other day before putting on a starchy white shirt. Shoes lasted longer, like anything else, if you took care of them.

The hum of rollerbladers lifted his attention. Gliding, holding hands, they shifted to a closed position, one dropping the other into a tango-like dip, then sweeping her upright into a fluid turn. She had a lovely face, glistening black hair, long legs. Both wore headphones and moved gracefully to the same music, as if in a dream.

A bluejay jeered. Kurt worked furiously on the loafer. If he could get rid of the squirrels and quit cigarettes, things would be better. Cigarettes might even have cost him his job. Joan was right to hate his smoking. There had been no scene, no angry words—it wasn't their style. The school year done, Joan simply left him a note. She had taken Allison to visit her parents a few towns away. That was two weeks ago, a week after his name appeared on the layoff list, but he hadn't told her yet. *Downsizing*—a tidy, clever word.

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Across the street, shirtless and tanned up, Sonny was trimming the holly that screened his porch. Kurt could see the new yin-and-yang tattoo on his shoulder, the blond ponytail wagging back and forth. The trimmings lay in a row where they would turn brown before Sonny got around to piling them at the curb for city collection. Kurt knew his routine. Sonny had owned the brick federal for three years and begun many projects, but rarely finished any. Sometimes he didn't weed his lawn, and soon it was covered with dandelion clocks. The prevailing southwest wind meant Kurt's weeding was for naught. Worse, Joan hated herbicides. But winsome Sonny, or his wife Angela, would often cross the street to admire and ask advice, and Kurt would oblige with elaborate tips about shears, centipede, Bermuda, and nutrient spikes—tips that were always ignored.

He squinted against the glare. What was Sonny up to now? Juggling tennis balls, entertaining the kids next door. The guy could never stay on task. But Joan liked his wacky charm, his ability to discuss politics and ideas, his knowledge of food and wines, his gusty enthusiasms. To Kurt, the guy seemed a born loafer. Where did he get the money for that house with its gentle gables and dormers? He worked as a waiter, mostly on weekends, and for the rest had his face in a book. Angela was a part-time student and an aerobics instructor at the Athletic Club. But they had a powerboat, and Sonny always had weed. Kurt suspected he was involved in dope, was picking up offshore parcels for a profit. *Christ, you judge everyone*, Joan had said. Maybe Sonny was just one of these trust-fund brats. Kurt somehow thought his parents lived up North, in Scarsdale, where that diet doctor was murdered, the woman who did it now peddling a book, collecting a bundle for film rights. Everyone had a scam.

Kurt had waxed the Taurus and showered. Arm weary, he stood at the window and saw how the car roof mirrored the trees. Except for the occasional slap of shingles, the quiet seemed magnified. None of the Vivaldi and Mozart that Joan listened to while grading student papers. Or Allison humming over her coloring book. And none of Tucker's meows—he was

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gone with Allison. Kurt had hopes the gray would be a squirrel killer, but Tucker turned out to be a big coward.

The bells of St. Ignatius rang a distant summons. Kurt was in no mood. Father Al's sermons were weak as drinks at the Dock House, except when he got passionate about pledges for a rec center. And the new church roof wasn't even paid for yet! Al had no more fiscal sense than the goddam government. Just back from a stretch in Mexico, Al had learned enough Spanish now to be able to bore the illegals in their own language. Kurt disliked foreign languages, especially in schools or church. His own grandfather spoke only German, and Kurt was never sure what in hell he was saying unless his mom was there to translate. But last night he had a dream and, except for his grandfather's gibberish—which seemed an attempt to tell Kurt something terribly important—the dream was a beautiful and seamless thing, full of cousins and the fun of building a towering tree house where, finally, they could see for miles. Nothing in Kurt's waking life seemed to form such a coherent whole these days. A moment here, a moment there.

Longing for a cigarette to go with his coffee, Kurt put down *Money* and went to the window. A timer had started his back yard sprinklers. He watched them slinging chains of water on the brilliant grass, then noticed the trapdoor of the shiny Havahart was closed. But instead of the frenetic back-and-forth of a squirrel, there was a flash of blue.

It was a jay. He knelt on the grass. The bird was the same blue as the hydrangea in Sonny's yard. Angela had arranged a bouquet when Kurt and Joan were last there for dinner, the night Sonny held forth about drawing. He was going to take courses because, self-taught, he knew little about composition. Copy was all he could do, like the painstaking kilim prayer rug, in colored inks, he had framed. Joan crooned over the detail. Kurt suspected you had to be stoned for that kind of concentration.

Joan said, "I've always wanted to draw and paint."

"Why not?" said Sonny. "I think it was Mallarmé who said, *'Le monde existe pour qu'on puisse le mettre dans une peinture.'* "

Joan had studied French and knew what he said, but Kurt froze, played with the champagne cork, made it roll in wobbly

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little circles under the rounds of hydrangea bloom. Drawing—now she would have even less time to unclutter the house. Finally Kurt said, "Waiting on tables pay enough for the tuition and art supplies?" He said it jokingly. Sonny responded with a laugh and asked why Kurt disapproved. Back home, Joan said he had been rude.

Kurt sighed deeply. "Whatever."

"Did you notice that Sonny's face looked puffy?"

"No, but I noticed his new tattoo that's not even a picture. Ponytail, earring, tattoo." He snorted. "What's he trying to do, bring back the '60s?"

Joan, as if nobody had spoken, said, "His face seems swollen."

"He eats too much."

"No, that's the point. He eats like a bird."

"You're hot for him."

"Are you crazy? What's the matter with you?"

He lifted the trapdoor. The jay squawked and disappeared in the green shade. He reset the trap and put a handful of sunflower seeds on the trigger pan, then remained on his knees, staring at nothing.

A guy had barricaded himself in the Starlight Motel and was armed with a shotgun. The camera panned the front of the complex. Cops in black caps and jumpsuits scurried with automatic weapons. The newswoman told the camera that a mental health patient was holed up behind her. He was on the phone, with negotiators, asking to see his estranged wife and promised to commit suicide once he had seen her, no longer be a nuisance to anyone.

"Great," said Kurt to the screen. "Save everyone a lot of money."

Finally he came out with his hands up. Officers charged up the stairway, shoved him against the wall, and handcuffed him. The newswoman said the man was depressed because he was unemployed and had stopped taking his medication. Final footage showed a cop put his hand on the man's head and gently squash him into the back of a squad car.

Kurt quickly stabbed some numbers. "Hi, it's Kurt. Is Joan there? I'm fine, thanks . . ." Kurt could hear the TV in the

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background. Joan's parents were news junkies. When Joan came to the phone, he did his Bogart: "Listen, sweetheart, I'm barricaded in a room at the Starlight Motel. I'm armed and dangerous. Now, if you and the kid don't come to see me, it's curtains. I'll have to give myself an enema with this high-powered water pistol. . . ." Using his own voice, he said, "Did you see the evening news?"

"You're hopelessly childish."

"I thought Sonny said any idiot could grow up and be responsible, but it took real talent to remain childish?"

"*Innocent* is the word he used."

"I heard another Sonny story today. Sonny gives the busboy at the Bistro a ride. Kid told me there's this awful stink. They open the trunk and find a dead cat. Then Sonny remembers. Miz Marsden, the old lady at the corner asked Sonny for help. Her cat, ol' Stonewall, had died. Sonny, of course, says yes, he'll take care of it, and forgets about the cat in the trunk. Ol' Sonny, he's quite a guy."

This was an absurd tale, with only a grain of truth, but ever since he entertained Joan's parents, easy gigglers, with anecdotes about Sonny, he couldn't quit. Sonny had become a character, and Kurt had only just discovered the pleasures of fabrication.

But Joan didn't laugh.

"You don't believe me? What am I hearing between the lines? Oh, I know. Shame on me—he's a very *giving* person. Is that it?"

"Yes, he gives you the opportunity to feel superior."

Brushing his teeth in the mirror, Kurt still looked strange to himself without his beard, even though he cut it off long ago. The two couples had been having drinks at the Dock House when, as usual, Sonny made a definitive statement: *For some, a beard neither conceals nor reveals*. Even though Sonny was taking potshots at Republicans—just to taunt him, it seemed—and mocking a convicted born-again felon, Kurt wondered whether the comment applied to him. So he let a week go by, then shaved his beard, leaving a mustache for a few days, then shaved that too. He was thirty-seven. His teeth were very white. He was good-looking. He had a first home in a once-elegant

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neighborhood on the comeback, in the historic district, one block from the waterfront. A systems analyst, he had a good income, and would soon be back to work. When Joan and Allison came back, and he was over the hump with nicotine, he'd feel better about himself, as they often said on talk shows.

The talk show host had seven couples seated in front of the camera. Each partner was exposing something unacceptable about the other. Kurt had heard tell of these programs, but, working, he never had a chance to see one, and now would never admit to Joan that he had. At first he felt vaguely guilty, then better, better because he never had the urge to wear Joan's panties, had not had an affair with her sister, never made Joan pick up after him (quite the contrary), wasn't obese, a closet drinker, a porno junkie, nose-picker or shoplifter. Feeling better about himself, but vaguely like a voyeur, he hit the remote and the screen went black. He was, however, a smoker, but trying to quit.

Slowly, in his Taurus, Kurt followed two girls on rollerblades. Both had smooth bronze skin, wore headbands, and spandex bicycle shorts. One had long blond hair. Kurt almost ran into them as they came whipping out of the Kappa house driveway and skated in the middle of the road. The girls were headed for the promenade—what Sonny called "ego alley." Kurt turned into his driveway, still seeing the lovely bottom of the blond, but cheat on Joan—that was another thing he didn't do.

The Dock House had an upper verandah and outside seating, white tablecloths, candles in jars with plastic nets, and college kids in safari shorts working as waiters. You could drink outside and watch the boats slide by or the rollerbladers cutting figures, but Kurt favored the air-conditioning. Two dug-in drinkers down at the end of the bar sat behind change, car keys, cigarettes and lighters.

Wolfie was the bartender, a big guy with a wide flat face who spoke in a confiding way out of the corner of his mouth. He set down Kurt's gin and tonic and said in almost a whisper, "You need to talk to an employment counselor, do some networking. Support groups are the thing. I was there, man, I know what

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you're feeling like, like it's *your* fault, like you have no real worth. Before I got this job, I made lists, y'know what I mean?"

Kurt didn't.

"Every day you make a list, scratch off the items as you complete each task, any little thing like emptying the garbage, washing your car. You have a sense of accomplishment. It's, like, the feeling of time wasted that gets to you, y'know what I mean?"

Kurt sipped his drink and nodded, looking at the red candles on the verandah that reminded him of church, Father Al and the Mexicans.

Wolfie continued, "This way you're in touch, you're the master, working your way toward a whole new reality. One thing at a time." Wolfie ran the rag over the dark wood of the bar. "You, ah, getting your CV around?"

"Sure. E-mail, the net, bulletin boards."

Wolfie said, "Something will open up."

"Yeah, a black goddam hole."

"You playing any golf?"

"Wolfie, Joan's taken off, I've got no work, golf is the furthest—"

"Wait." Wolfie's face lit up. He told Kurt he had an idea. "I know this guy with a new software company. I'm supposed to play golf with him. You make the foursome, casually talk turkey, hey, something might happen!"

Kurt said thanks. But taking advice from a bartender—Christ, who would he be listening to next? Wolfie flashed his big canines. "Let me try to set it up, okay? Meanwhile, hit the driving range, this guy's good."

Kurt stood at the window, phone to his ear, listening to Joan and watching a squirrel, a fat one, come head first down the pecan tree. Once on the ground, it stood on hind legs, exposing a white belly and throat. "Joan, I'm her father. I'm allowed visitation."

"You sound like a soap. This is the first time you even mentioned her."

"Well, how about her spending Saturday with me?"

Joan said, "Fine."

One foot at a time, the squirrel moved toward the trap, thick

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brush tail straight out. "Have you, ah, been to a lawyer by any chance?"

Joan sighed. "Are you getting any exercise besides jumping to conclusions?"

With maddening slowness, the squirrel reached the wire.

Kurt said, "Well, I don't know what to think."

"That's up to you, but thinking instead of reacting would be a start."

The squirrel jumped on top of the trap and sat. "So, you're not coming back because *I* need to think about things."

"Partly, but I told you I need some space for a while."

"*I* don't give you space?"

Joan said nothing. The squirrel dropped again to the ground and stuck its head into the opening. Kurt whispered, "Come to Papa."

Joan said, "Who's there with you?"

"Nobody. You said *I* don't give you space."

"You're being argumentative. The quarrel ought to be with yourself."

"You sound like our neighbor, the deep thinker across the street." Kurt waited. Something spooked the squirrel. Now he seemed uninterested, was moving off. There was a sigh on the other end. Not even goodbye. "Goddam it!"

Sunlight off the harbor made the Dock House and the other white waterfront buildings glow. The season was coming along. Already a village of sailboats at anchor was starting to form on the other side of the channel next to the salt marshes. What a life, thought Kurt. Pay no dockage fees. Row over in dinghies when they needed provisions. All those twirling props on the wind generators—free electricity. It was breezy, masts and halyards clanking. Allison was licking a frozen yogurt cone and looking seaward at a catsail with bright green and yellow diagonals. Sonny should paint this instead of his little designs, Kurt thought.

"Daddy, maybe we could go out in Sonny's boat again." Allison was seven, her hair off-gold, like a field of grain.

"Well, he's been busy lately."

"Can we go over to see him tonight after dinner?"

"We'll see, sweetheart." Kurt wasn't anxious to share his

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daughter, and Sonny had a way of mesmerizing kids with a bagful of magic tricks and amusing stories. Kurt was more interested in learning what was going on with Joan. "Has Mom been talking a lot to Grandpa and Grandma?"

"I guess so."

"Has Daddy's name been flying around the room?"

"Just when we played Monopoly."

"Oh?"

"Mommy said you still had the first nickel you ever earned." Allison giggled. "Grandma and Grandpa think you're very funny."

Kurt lay in bed. For the past half-hour Sonny's dog Blackie, a big Lab, barked twice every twenty seconds. It sounded like *woe, woe.* Sonny exercised Blackie by throwing a tennis ball that often got into Kurt's Japanese boxwoods where the dog would always piss on vigorous shrubs that eventually turned yellow. Or he'd leave a pile of turds on the lawn. Joan was always telling him to relax, think of the Big Picture. Whatever that was. *Woe, woe.* Allison loved animals—Blackie and Tucker, birds and squirrels, even snakes. Kurt was in the back yard, studying her blond profile as she petted Blackie's huge head. Allison had a doll's round face, a nose that was small and perfectly shaped with a saddle of summer freckles. Her eyes were large and blue. She pointed to the back door, telling him silently to go into the house, so he did. The first thing he saw was a vase of wild flowers, the orange trumpets of ditch lilies, on the kitchen table. "Daddy, Daddy," Allison cried. "Mommy and I had fun picking flowers for you, for Father's Day."

"I know, sweetheart," he said, "let me . . . ," but when he turned around, the kitchen and the back yard beyond the open door were empty.

Woe, woe.

Kurt stood in the half dark of the kitchen. The steamy Carolina summer seemed to have set in for good. With the blinds drawn, it was cooler. He and Joan argued often about the most effective way to cool the house without running the AC full blast and driving up the electric bill. Drawn blinds made

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everything gloomy, she said. Kurt was talking to her on the phone. "I can't talk," she said. "We're on our way to a gallery."

"Then when *will* we talk?" he pushed.

"I'm not sure it would do much good right now."

"Are you telling me you're out of my life?"

"I didn't say that."

"Look, you've been gone long enough now. I miss you, I want you and Allison back. What's your problem?"

There was static from Joan's cordless. Kurt could see her sitting out under her parents' white gazebo with the wedding-cake rails and filigree at the eaves. "What do *you* think the problem is?"

Christ, it infuriated him. His mother used to pull the same crap. When he was a teenager, she'd give him the silent treatment for a couple of days and when he asked what was wrong, she'd say, "*You* know what's wrong." Then he'd play the game and ask what he had done. "*You* know what you did." God, it hurt to think about that house, his mother's paranoia, the mice, the wood stove, and everything else.

"Joan, I was a smoker when you married me, you knew what you were getting into. But I always smoke in the back yard, winter and summer, you know that. And I'm trying to stop."

"I can't talk right now."

"You've got to tell me if there's a future here." Then he said something he regretted even while saying it: "I've got to get on with my life." Joan often laughed at such TV clichés, but worse, without Joan, he knew he wouldn't get on, he'd go under.

Kurt looked down at the trap. The squirrel turned in tight circles, shiny black eyes. It was the one good thing about Joan and Allison being gone, he thought. At last he could do something about the infestation. The neighborhood was overrun. Holes in the lawn, a nest in the attic, that loud annoying slap as they landed on the shingles. One even came down the chimney while they were out shopping and chewed away some window mullions trying to escape. But Allison didn't want him to catch and remove all her little "friends." Fat chance—like the Mexicans, they were here to stay. As a kid, he used to hunt squirrels with his father, and his mom cooked them. They saved on their meat bill. When he pointed out a recipe for

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squirrel stew that he found in the Sunday newspaper, Joan didn't think it was funny. "Why don't you think about your daughter's feelings, or someone else's once in a while?"

"I was only joking," he lied.

He drove across the bridge and along a road with pine forest on both sides. He passed a gloomy little cemetery and turned down a dirt road by a tobacco barn smothered in kudzu. A deer tower stood at the side of a field that was sprouting broad green leaves of tobacco—source of all his woes. After a bumpy mile, he negotiated a steep dip and climbed the other side to a cabin overhung with boas of Spanish moss. The cabin belonged to his friend Stan, a hunter, who was trying to restock squirrels that had once been plentiful.

Lifting the trap from the Taurus, he set it down and watched the gray squirrel frantically bang first into one door, then the other, its nose bloody, unable to figure a way out. "Relax, ol' buddy," Kurt said. "Think of the Big Picture." The squirrel streaked away and was lost among the gray trunks.

The Golf Center was new, out of town, and barely findable, at the end of a white gravel road. Dust from a recent passage hovered above the road like ground fog. Four or five true believers were practicing at the rubber tees. Six dollars seemed a lot for a bucket of balls, but you had to spend money to make it. Another guy was nicely clicking out shots that sailed high, seemed to stop against the wall of trees, then bounced on the closely shaved humps and swales dotted with white. Kurt envied the guy his swing. And when he began to hit his first balls, he felt how deeply ungrooved he had become. His muscles refused to obey. A sense of inadequacy oppressed him until he finally hit the sweet spot, and the ball sailed unbelievably high and straight. Then the air offered a happy tang of cut grass, but he flubbed his next shots and felt an even deeper sense of failure. He was sweating. Gnats swirled. Six black cows grazed beyond the road where a car left dust that settled slowly, whitely, and reminded him of Joan's filmy nightie, the way she once knelt above him, took it off, and laughingly tossed it over her head in the moonlit room.

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Sonny waved to Kurt from his roof peak, roiling black clouds behind him moving in off the ocean. Wind had begun to toss the treetops. Kurt gathered clothes from the collapsible wooden rack in the back yard. With Joan gone, there was no sense using the dryer. Save on the electric bill. He had forgotten how cheaply one can live alone. Not that he wanted to. But nobody else's schedule stood in the way, and the house didn't get messy.

National Weather Service had a crawl on the bottom of the TV screen saying that there were severe thunderstorm and tornado warnings until nine o'clock. Randolph Scott, minus his ten-gallon hat, was pinned down by gunfire next to a watering trough, reloading, trying to figure out his next move when the screen went black. The AC also went silent.

From the upstairs bedroom, he could see Sonny still on the roof. He had a string in his hands. Kurt followed the upward arc of the string to a pair of linked box kites with glittery silver tails that dove and climbed again; one was yellow, the other bright red. The air around them was sooty as the chimney of a hurricane lamp before it went out. Sonny was laughing. The first tracers of rain already made long diagonals on the window.

"That boy smokes too much dope."

That was another thing Kurt didn't do.

Yesterday during the storm, the rain gutters had spilled curtains of water before the windows. Goddam squirrels again. Kurt leaned the ladder against the gutters and climbed up. He was already sweating. Bushes, grass, cars—everything seemed on the edge of combustion. Twigs and sodden leaves blackened his hands. It annoyed him that he had forgotten a bucket and had to throw handfuls of glop onto the trim lawn.

No sooner had he climbed onto the sizzling roof than the ladder slid from his grasp and toppled into the azaleas below. The last person he remembered seeing was Borden, a guy toward the end of the street, heading somewhere on that loud motorcycle of his. While waiting for someone to happen along, he continued to unclog the gutters, coming upon a yellow tennis ball, then a dead bluejay. He wondered if the jay was the one he had trapped. Perhaps it had injured itself banging against the wire.

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Hands and knees burning, he began to yell for help, discreetly. The neighborhood AC compressors hummed in response. The sun was an angry red. He looked over at Sonny's newly-shingled roof. The story of that new roof made Kurt uneasy, but now wasn't the time to think about it. The dormers seemed like unforgiving eyes.

A little kid with earphones and baggy red shorts came up the street. Kurt yelled. The kid stopped and stared at him open-mouthed, with impersonal curiosity, as if at a TV sitcom, then laughed and marched away.

Jesus. The shingles were hotter than hell's hinges. Sweat stung his eyes. He might get someone's attention on the next block, so he climbed to the crest. Through a break in the trees, he could see the inlet and the ocean beyond. Boats were cool black cutouts, dancing on diamonds of pure sunlight. Allison kept begging him to get one, even a dinghy, but boats had an endless appetite for money.

Somebody whistled. Thank God. It was Sonny coming across the street. "Don't say a thing," said Sonny. "Don't even ask. Dante says that if you see a need and wait to be asked, it would be best if you didn't help at all."

Deeply grateful, Kurt was annoyed—why in hell did he always have to quote somebody?

Angela's face was rosy with reflected candlelight as she noodled on her guitar and hummed. Sonny put down new wineglasses. He had bought a case of Chambertin and wanted Kurt to be the first to have a taste.

Sonny held out one of the glasses. "Do you know what they call this?"

Kurt didn't.

Sonny poured wine into all three glasses. "It's called an '*impitoyable*.' That means *pitiless*. The shape of the glass focuses the bouquet and your nose renders a verdict that is '*impitoyable*.' "

Angela strummed and hummed.

"Interesting," said Kurt. Amazing the kinds of knowledge Sonny had filed away. But it was all useless, thought Kurt, like his monologues about unmoved movers, names like Pascal and Lao-tzu, the whole nine yards. Gibberish, like his grandfather's

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German. Sonny's living room was something though—wall to wall books, almost no furniture.

Angela stopped playing and took a glass from Sonny. They hoisted together and said cheers. Angela started strumming again. It was hypnotic. The wine was sensational.

"So, how's Joan and Allison?"

"Well, Joan's mother has these headaches that put her out of commission," Kurt lied. "She's having tests run, and Joan figured she could do some cooking, help out, you know? As soon as her mother gets back to speed, they'll be back. This wine is really delicious."

Sonny's eyes showed candle flames.

Unable to sleep, Kurt realized that the tune was "Amazing Grace."

That new roof of Sonny, the one he'd flown the kite from—it reminded him of the party where he'd first used Sonny as a figure of fun. With a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he described how Sonny got himself a new roof. As God was his witness, Kurt had tried to set him straight. Don't replaster your living room ceiling, he'd told Sonny, until you get the roof reshingled, the leaks taken care of. Kurt gave Sonny the names and phone numbers of several neighbors with newly shingled roofs. See if they were satisfied, Kurt advised. Get estimates. He also mentioned Borden, the guy with the loud motorcycle. Borden worked in the building trades, was an insider, might put Sonny onto someone good, and cheap.

But no. Sonny had the plasterers one day, the roofers the next. Very early one morning Kurt heard pounding and scraping. First thing he saw was an orange Gatorade keg tied to Sonny's chimney. Brown, shirtless, and varnished with sweat, these Mexicans were all over the roof, a whole tribe, agile as monkeys. With a big torso and wrap-around sunglasses, the crew boss had a bandido mustache—a mustache, Kurt thought, that neither concealed nor revealed. Leaning against a rusted-out pickup, the guy laughed and yelled in Spanish to the muchachos on the roof. They were scraping off the shingles and tarpaper using hoes with straightened blades. Already they had a good part of the front side down to bare wood, the pink azaleas drooped over with tatters of tarpaper.

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Kurt, with his first cup of Joan's good coffee, stood next to the crew boss and watched the show. Sonny came out in swim trunks carrying a blue and white cooler.

"Aren't you going to stick around, keep an eye on the job?"

Sonny shook his head. "Too much noise. I'm going fishing, drop anchor, and read. You want to come?"

"Sonny," Kurt whispered, "these guys—"

"What about 'em?"

"They don't look professional. Are they bonded? I mean, they're using *your* ladders, aren't they? No ladders of their own—doesn't that tell you something?"

"Man, I'm getting a great deal." Then he said something in Spanish to the boss who laughed and said, "*Sí, sí, gracias, más tarde, amigo.*"

There was no arguing with Sonny. And he'd left his house wide open!

Later that afternoon, at his computer, Kurt noticed that a loud hush hung over the neighborhood. The roofers were gone. The yellowish exposed wood of Sonny's roof gleamed in the sun. They had probably made a trip to the landfill with the stripped shingles and tarpaper. Probably lunch, then the ole Mexican siesta no doubt. It seemed they were gone for hours.

About three o'clock, Kurt came to the upstairs window. Half the sky was black, the sun about to disappear behind a phalanx of inky thunderheads sliding toward the neighborhood out of the west. Then it was dark, and even more silent until a breeze kicked up the white undersides of leaves. The Mexicans arrived only minutes before lightning opened the sky. They scurried up ladders shouldering rolls of tarpaper and carrying sheets of plastic. One of them fell off the corner of the porch roof into the bushes. The others laughed. The boss staggered around the front lawn, pointing and yelling. The rain was torrential. It lashed Kurt's windows so hard he could barely see the tarp snap off the roof and fly over the next house.

"They're victims of bad luck too," said Sonny later that night. Kurt stood in the front room, looking at most of the new plaster ceiling in damp piles on the floor. Sonny shrugged, then laughed, "*C'est la vie.*"

Kurt's punch line for the roofing story was, "Yeah, that's life all right, the stoned life according to Sonny." Everyone

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laughed, said what a character this Sonny must be. Joan, however, didn't laugh, said nothing on the drive home. There was more too, but he wasn't ready to think about it yet.

Kurt stood at the kitchen sink. Tap water instant coffee steamed on the counter, a comedown from Joan's ground French-roasted beans. Kurt now ate over the sink, as he did before he got married. No mess. No clean-up. In both hands, he held a sandwich and noticed, on a limb near the window, a squirrel with a pecan in both paws. Kurt's jaws moved slowly. The squirrel's jaws moved slowly. They ate watching each other. Kurt stopped chewing. The squirrel stopped chewing. "The little shit is mocking me." Kurt put down the sandwich, his face getting hot.

As usual, he was sweeping the driveway, a small pile of trimming from the weedwacker, turf from the edger. His Bermuda grass came to a perfect right angle at the drive and ran along the sidewalk, straight as the part in his hair. Crickets were loud. He tapped his empty shirt pocket—the old reflex. Angela was coming across the street with Blackie who would naturally do some watering. Kurt was beginning to see Sonny and Angela as part of his woes.

"Your lawn is so lush," said Angela.

Kurt thanked her and considered the large green eyes peering at him from behind oversized lenses.

"You haven't heard from Joan?"

"Well, every time I call her, she can't talk in front of Allison, or if Allison isn't there, she can't talk in front of her mother."

"They'll be back. She probably just needs space. Sonny used to be a counselor, you know, why not come over tonight, talk?"

"I really appreciate it, but I have another engagement," he lied, making himself even angrier. Now he'd have to leave the house for a few hours, spend money for pizza.

It was near sundown. Squirrels were becoming scarce. Without the slap of shingles and Blackie barking half the night, he was sleeping late, sensing, as Wolfie said, a terrible waste of time. It had been three days now since he had caught a squirrel. In all, he had relocated sixteen with their country cousins.

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Instead of being pleased, however, not to hear the slap of shingles, he was annoyed. Time was losing its shape. The yard seemed horribly empty. Even the red of cardinals and the blue of jays were gone. It was as if he had become a cosmic *persona non grata*. He was unsure what to do and with dread he approached the window but, like an answered prayer, across the lawn, the silver door of the trap was closed. "Yes!" He had come to enjoy the repeated ride out into farm country, the release, the orderly ritual.

At Stan's shack, he knelt to release the spring holding the door, but it was stuck. The squirrel turned in tight fast circles. Kurt held the side of the cage to apply pressure to the door, his fingers poking through the wire. Suddenly he felt a hot stab in his ring finger. The squirrel was attached, and wouldn't let go. He screamed and freed himself. His finger was bleeding, the pain shooting. The finger wrapped in his handkerchief, he flung the trap and the squirrel into the trunk of the car.

Past the helipad, he rolled into outpatient parking. Leaning against a gurney, a policeman eyed Kurt, then said, "Way you gone wid that thang?"

"It bit me, and might have rabies. They have to test it."

After a bulky gray woman took his vitals, from last tetanus shot to family insanity, he sat next to three Mexicans. They wore identical white T-shirts, probably from the same stolen three-pack, thought Kurt. They seemed familiar. One had a purple swollen cheek, his arm in a bandana sling. Maybe he saw them at church.

"*Mira eso cabrón*," said one.

"*Si, con suya favorita!*"

Opposite Kurt were two guys talking about cars. The guy with the John Deere hat said, "My cousin, he got him a Transam . . . hit this ol' coon . . . flatter 'en bird shit on a Buick!" The other snorted. He wore a black T-shirt that said BUDWEISER 10,000 GALLON CLUB. Now they looked from the squirrel to Sonny.

Sonny held up his hand. "Bit me," he said.

The Budweiser guy said, "Well, that's what you git fo' tryin' to diddle that pore little thang!"

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The deadpan Mexicans made them hoot even louder until a nurse called, and they followed her through the swinging doors. Kurt's face broiled. He hoped the Mexicans hadn't understood. Then he recognized them, the roofers who ruined Sonny's ceiling.

The boss said, "*Es la suya?* Eees dat you leetle fren?"

Kurt said, "I remember you guys. That rainy day, the ceiling on the floor." The crew boss remembered him, so Kurt said, "So what really happened? Too many beers for lunch?"

The Mexican's dark eyes got angry, indignant. He made Sonny understand that it was *mala suerte*, bad luck, and that his men were not *borracho*. He had two crews, doing two jobs at once. They worked hard. They wanted to do for themselves, not take charity. And insurance paid for the señor's ceiling.

"Whoa, I was only joking."

"Yes, beeg joke," said the crew boss. "*Sí, chiste*."

"*Qué chistoso*!" snarled the other.

Kurt felt at first that he was living in an anecdote on the build, and these Mexicans would color the telling. But they resisted a version of themselves Kurt had settled on, even painfully altered it. His finger throbbed badly. It was no joke. He felt feverish. Mexicans gone, he was alone with the squirrel, and the looks of other patients.

Dr. Janko was small, had a warm impish smile, and was developing a bald spot that suggested a monk's tonsure. He said that rabies wasn't carried by rodents, not in this part of the country. And in any case this lively squirrel didn't exhibit any symptoms, so Kurt could take it with him. Meanwhile, he was going to betadyne the wound, take a few stitches, then give Kurt two injections: tetanus and antibiotic. "It says here you live on Azalea Street," Dr. Janko smiled. "Do you, ah, know Sonny Hastings?"

"Sure, he's a friend of mine," said Kurt. "How do *you* know him?"

"The Bistro. He's a great waiter, very friendly, knows something about everything. He's also seeing a colleague of mine. How's he doing?"

"Why? Has he got some kind of condition?"

Dr. Janko hesitated. "You, ah, said you were his friend, so I

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just assumed . . ." He patted the examination table. "Please climb up and lie on your back."

His bandaged finger, white, seemed to float in the dark. He sat behind the wheel of the Taurus, not sure what to do first. He felt hot as that day on the roof, frightened too. In three years he had learned little about his neighbors. Poor Sonny. Angela said he had been a counselor. Kurt fumbled the ignition key, seeing himself as others must—a white shirt, loafers with tassels, a guy who straightens the pictures in every room he enters. A joker like the Mexican said. There was a racket on the helipad, figures running, then the chopper rose from its nest of amber lights and swung off to the northeast with nav lights flashing. He watched until the lights disappeared and the quiet came back. The squirrel made the wire of the cage ping as it moved in quick circles. Poor thing was frightened. Cigarettes were the least of it, he knew that now. He decided to cross the river and free the squirrel. Then toss the trap. Talk to Joan. Sonny too. But first turn the key. As Wolfie advised, one thing at time.

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LUCILLE DAY

In the Hidden Garden: Two Translations of the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon as it is often called, is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible in that it contains both male and female speakers who are equally assertive and eloquent, openly celebrates erotic love, and makes no mention of a father or a "father's house," although it refers many times to mothers. Moreover, nowhere does it explicitly mention God. Not surprisingly, this book has generated endless controversy, which can be traced all the way back to the first-century rabbis who argued whether or not to canonize it. Some of those who argued in favor read the Song as an allegory for the love between God and Israel. In succeeding centuries, Christian scholars and clergymen developed their own allegorical interpretations of the Song, reading it as a testimonial to the love between Christ and the Church, Christ and the individual soul, or God and the Christian people. One cannot help but wonder, however, if many ordinary people through the centuries didn't entertain other ideas about the meaning of this work, which begins in the King James Version of *The Holy Bible* with the words, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine" (1:2). It is therefore refreshing that twentieth-century scholars, including Marcia Falk, and Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, the authors of two new translations of the Song,[1] are not afraid to call a love poem a love poem. Falk and the Blochs believe that the Song originated as love poetry

[1] THE SONG OF SONGS: A New Translation and Interpretation, by *Marcia Falk*. Illustrated by *Barry Moser*. Harper San Francisco. 1990. $18.95 (contains a six-chapter translator's study). THE SONG OF SONGS: A New Translation, by *Marcia Falk*. Illustrated by *Barry Moser*. Harper San Francisco. 1993. $12.00 (paperback edition with preface in lieu of translator's study). THE SONG OF SONGS: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary, by *Ariel Bloch* and *Chana Bloch*. Afterword by *Robert Alter*. Random House. 1995. $25.00.

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and that only later did it enter the Bible and take on the meanings ascribed by Judaism and Christianity. Such an interpretation does not denigrate the religious and spiritual significance of the Song, but simply says that its literal meaning is powerful and valid, and that to ignore this meaning is a denial of the obvious.

One might ask why anyone should bother to do a new English translation of the Song, since many are already available to readers: in addition to the most familiar translations—those of the King James and Revised Standard Versions of the Bible—these include versions in *The Jerusalem Bible*, *The New American Bible*, *The New English Bible*, the *New American Standard Bible*, and the *Good News Bible*, to name just a few. Also to be considered are the versions of the Song in the various revisions of *The Holy Scriptures*, prepared by the Jewish Publication Society of America, as well as the many translations by individual scholars. While giving plenty of credit where it is due, Falk and the Blochs argue convincingly that yet another translation is needed, that none of the existing ones does full justice to the original Hebrew poetry.

The King James version of the Song is a good point of reference, because it is familiar. It is also a literary work of indisputable beauty and integrity. So why try to improve upon it? First of all, although its cadences are pleasing, it is basically a prose translation, no different in style from the other books of the Bible. Yet everyone who has read the original agrees that the Hebrew *is* different. It does not sound like the other books of the Bible: it is exquisite, incomparable poetry. And there are other problems. Speakers change frequently and unexpectedly, without indications to let us know who is talking, and the text contains many archaisms, some of which are jarring to the modern ear, e.g., "I am sick of love" (2:5 and 5:8) and "my bowels were moved for him" (5:4). These shortcomings are readily apparent to a lay reader. In addition, Falk and the Blochs point out that a great deal of scholarship since 1611, when the King James translation was completed, has revealed more accurate readings of many verses, and that the King James translators would, for example, call a couch a table if necessary to satisfy their religious agenda and sense of propriety.

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Falk's translation, more than that of the Blochs, is a radical departure from the King James and the subsequent translations that have attempted to improve upon it. Her goal was to create a version that would have an impact on modern readers similar to the one she believes the original must have had on the people of ancient Israel, or, in her words, "to create an entirely fresh version that would open the locked gardens of the Hebrew." The resultant process led to lavish use of assonance, alliteration, and rhyme, all of which are abundant in the original, as well as to interpretation of obscure images for modern readers. For example, Falk translates 1:9–11 as:

> Like a mare among stallions,
> You lure, I am held
>
> > your cheeks framed with braids
> > your neck traced with shells
>
> I'll adorn you with gold
> and with silver bells

The King James reads:

> 9 I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots.
> 10 Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold.
> 11 We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver.

The Hebrew says "mare," not "company of horses," and this was corrected in the Revised Standard Version. But what does the image of a mare associated with Pharaoh's chariots really mean? As it turns out, all of Pharaoh's chariots were pulled by stallions—something that would have been common knowledge to the ancient people of the Middle East—and they were distracted when a mare was set loose among them during a battle. Thus, Falk interpreted this verse, rather than literally translating it.

The Bloch version is closer to the King James tradition:

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My love, I dreamed of you
as a mare, my very own,
among Pharaoh's chariots.

Your cheekbones,
those looped earrings,
that string of beads at your throat!

I will make you golden earrings
with silver filigree.

The Blochs claim that the Hebrew verb most translators of the Song have interpreted as "compare" can also mean to "imagine" or to "conjure up a mental image," which led to their rendering it as "dream." These verses illustrate the major differences between the Falk and Bloch translations: the former is more musical and startlingly new; the latter, written in the contemporary free-verse idiom, is more literal and recognizable as a step along the continuum that began with the King James version.

Both the Falk and Bloch versions are unusual among translations of the Song in that the skills and knowledge of a single poet and a single biblical scholar are brought to bear on the task. Falk is both a poet and a biblical scholar; Chana Bloch is primarily a poet, Ariel Bloch a scholar. In contrast, the vast majority of translations have been done either by a committee of religious scholars as part of their work on a new edition of the entire Bible, or by an individual scholar with a particular interest in the Song. The need to have a poet involved in translating the Song is illustrated by a single verse from the translation by Hugh J. Schonfield, an eminent scholar who set to work "without any claim to poetical skill":[2] "While your two breasts are as two fawns / The twins of a female gazelle" (7:3). Poets Falk and Bloch have done away with all the extra words in this verse: "Your breasts—two fawns, the twins of a gazelle" (Falk); "Your breasts are two fawns, twins of a gazelle" (Bloch and Bloch). Did anyone really think the Shulamite would have one breast or three, or that the twins would be born to a male

[2] *The Song of Songs*, trans. by Hugh J. Schonfield (New York, 1959), p. 87.

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gazelle? When a scholar who is not a poet decides to take a stab at a poetic translation of the Song, the result can be even less fortunate: "He leaps the hills, he skips the height. / As a hart or fawn my love is light—" (2:8–9).[3] This is not quite doggerel; neither, I would argue, is it good poetry.

I began my journey into translations of the Song of Songs with the preconception that the most egregious errors would be made by individual scholars. Committees, I reasoned, would weed out the most bizarre, idiosyncratic interpretations, and while the collective process might also weed out some brilliant new insights, it would ensure that the final product contained no truly awful lines. This hypothesis turned out to be false. The shortcomings of individual scholars notwithstanding, I found some of the most objectionable lines and interpretations in the work of committees. Evidently, there is safety in numbers: a group is willing to take a chance on something that no one working alone would dare try. For example, *The New English Bible* contains the following lines:[4]

> I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem,
> by the spirits and goddesses of the field:
> Do not rouse her, do not disturb my love
> until she is ready.
>
> (2:7)

Spirits and goddesses of the field? These beings may be at home in a pagan chant or a new age poem, but they are totally out of place in biblical poetry. The King James Version reads:

> I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye not stir up, nor awaken my love, till he please.

One need be neither a zoologist nor a Hebrew scholar to know that roes and hinds cannot be mistaken for spirits and goddesses: these creatures are not even in the same kingdoms, let alone phyla. Also notice that in the first version of the above

[3] *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, trans. by Michael D. Goulder, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement 36, 1986.

[4] *The New English Bible: The Old Testament*, New York, 1970.

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verse, the speaker is male, in the second version female. Because the various parts of speech have gender and number in Hebrew, it is almost always possible to determine whether a particular passage of the Song is spoken by a man, a woman, or a group of speakers, and everyone except the translators of *The New English Bible* seems to agree that 2:7 is spoken by a woman, because it appears in the context of several verses that clearly have a female speaker. In fact, *The New English Bible* translators take an extreme position in their interpretation of the gender of many verses and attribute some of the most passionate and profound ones spoken by a woman, according to other translators, to her lover. They thereby add a layer of sexual stereotyping that is absent from other translations, and, most scholars agree, from the original text.

Falk, who introduced the technique of using different typefaces to indicate the various speakers in the Song, and the Blochs, who also use this device, translate 2:7 as follows:

> Daughters of Jerusalem, swear to me
> by the gazelles, by the deer in the field,
> that you will never awaken love
> until it is ripe.
>
> (Bloch and Bloch)

> O women of the city,
> Swear by the wild field doe
>
> Not to wake or rouse us
> Till we fulfill our love.
>
> (Falk)

We now have four different interpretations of the ending of this verse: the daughters of Jerusalem are alternatively being told not to awaken a sleeping woman, not to awaken a sleeping man, not to awaken love prematurely, or not to interrupt the speaker's lovemaking. Where is the truth? The majority of translations take the approach of either the King James or Bloch versions, translating this verse either as a woman's plea not to awaken her lover or as a moral admonition. Falk, along

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with a few other scholars,[5] has taken a courageous leap and said that "do not rouse love until it is satisfied" (a literal translation) means, essentially, "don't disturb us until our lovemaking is complete," which is much more in keeping with the tone and content of the rest of the Song than is a warning not to indulge in love too soon.

In places far too numerous to discuss here, both Falk and the Blochs offer stunning new interpretations that correct earlier translations of the Song, including the King James. Both, for example, give new readings of the line the King James translates as "terrible as an army with banners" (6:4 and 6:10). While this is a powerful and intriguing image, contemporary scholars agree that there is no "army with banners" in the Hebrew. Falk translates this line as "frightening as visions," because, after examining the roots and possible meanings of *nidgalot*, the questionable word, she concluded that it was derived from the Akkadian *dagalu*, meaning "glance." The Blochs, who came up with "daunting as the stars in their courses," argue that *nidgalot* suggests something high because it is apparently related to *dagul me-rebabah*, which means "towering above ten thousand," and that whenever "sun" and "moon" are followed by a third term in biblical poetry, that term is always "stars," as in "clear as the moon, / bright as the blazing sun, / daunting as the stars in their courses!" (Bloch and Bloch, 6:10). Although Falk and the Blochs interpret *nidgalot* differently, both offer a satisfying new image that makes sense within the context of the Song and is solidly grounded in scholarship.

Another case in point is 1:5, which in the King James reads:

> I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.

Here are the Falk and Bloch versions:

> Yes, I am black! and radiant—
> O city women watching me—

[5] See *The Song of Songs*, trans. by Peter Jay, with an Introduction by David Goldstein and illustrations by Nikos Stavroulakis (London, 1975); and *The Song of Songs: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, by Robert Gordis (New York, 1954).

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As black as Kedar's goathair tents
Or Solomon's fine tapestries.
(Falk)

I am dark, daughters of Jerusalem,
and I am beautiful!
Dark as the tents of Kedar, lavish
as Solomon's tapestries.
(Bloch and Bloch)

The Hebrew word that is translated "but" in the vast majority of previous versions of the Song actually more commonly means "and." Most of Falk's and the Blochs' predecessors have, apparently, succumbed to the unfortunate cultural bias that considers darkness and beauty somehow contradictory.[6] Both Falk and the Blochs have also improved upon this verse by adding details that make the images of Kedar's tents and Solomon's tapestries come alive.

In fewer instances, Falk or the Blochs have, in my opinion, thrown out the baby with the bath water. Chapter 2 of the King James begins, "I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys." The images are lovely and the sound repetitions delicate and pleasing. So why not leave well enough alone? Falk translates this verse as "In sandy earth or deep / In valley soil / I grow, a wildflower thriving / On your love." The Hebrew original says, "I am the X of Sharon and the Y of the valleys," where X and Y are botanical names, most likely flowers, but no one knows for sure what flowers they are. Rather than simply trying to identify the flowers, Falk chose to interpret the verse. She tells us that these are wildflowers, not cultivated ones, and that they grow in various types of soil—that is, the woman can thrive anywhere, as long as she is with her beloved. With this

[6] Biblical scholar Marvin H. Pope, who also concludes that "black *and* beautiful" is the correct interpretation, provides a detailed discussion of this verse in *The Anchor Bible Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, by Marvin H. Pope (New York, 1977), pp. 307–318. He and Falk, whose translation first became available to scholars in 1976 through University Microfilms International, may have arrived independently at this interpretation.

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particular verse, I think interpretation is unnecessary: I am fully satisfied with "I am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys," and I don't need to be told what it means. The Bloch version is close to the King James: "I am the rose of Sharon, / the wild lily of the valleys."

Falk also seems overly zealous in interpreting the verses in which the woman asserts that she and her lover belong to each other, e.g., "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (King James, 6:3). In all cases, she changes possession to "turning." Her translation of 6:3 reads, "I turn to meet my love, / he'll turn to me." As in Falk's translation of 2:1, discussed above, there is nothing wrong with these lines per se; they are perfectly acceptable as lines of English poetry. The problem is that turning is not the same thing as owning. Falk has come up with a different meaning here, because she wants to read an active verb into the ellipsis "I to my lover and my lover to me." Personally, I find the idea of turning toward someone, either physically or emotionally, less compelling than the idea of belonging to another person, in the sense of having an exclusive romantic bond with that person. Moreover, the verbs "turn" and "meet" exist in the present tense in Hebrew, and there therefore would have been no reason for the author of the original text to omit them, whereas Hebrew always omits the verb to "be" in the present tense. The Bloch version, like all others I have read, translates the missing verb as to "be" and interprets these verses as assertions that the lovers belong to each other: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Bloch and Bloch, 6:3).

Far more often, however, Falk's intuition and poetic sensibility are right on the mark, her interpretations brilliant and startling, and the resultant verses satisfying as never before. I will give two examples. Before reading Falk's translation, I had never found 1:16–17 particularly interesting or sensual. The King James says:

> 16 Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green.
> 17 The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.

Falk translates these verses as follows:

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How fine
are you, my lover,
what joy
we have together.

How green
our bed of leaves,
our rafters of cedars,
our juniper eaves.

Falk has turned these verses into a song. She has also put the lovers outdoors, where, after reading her translation, one is certain they belong.

Finally, consider 8:6 from the King James:

> Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is as cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

Falk translates this as:

Stamp me in your heart,
Upon your limbs,
Sear my emblem deep
Into your skin.

For love is strong as death,
Harsh as the grave.
Its tongues are flames,
A fierce and holy blaze.

Here, she has taken the image of a seal, which in previous translations could be an amulet worn on the chest or arm, and turned it into the far more powerful image of an emblem burned into the flesh. This interpretation seems particularly apt since it is echoed by the image of fire that shortly follows.

A translator tries to be true to the vision and intent of the original author of the work being translated. But who was the author of the Song of Songs? Although the first line of the work can be literally translated as, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's," virtually all contemporary biblical scholars agree

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that this means "The Song of Songs, which is for Solomon" or "which is dedicated to Solomon," not "which was written by King Solomon." Their main evidence is that the language of the Song indicates that it was written long after Solomon's reign. The title Song of Songs has two meanings: "the song that is the greatest of all songs" and "the song that is a collection of songs." Elaborating on the second meaning, Falk argues that the Song is an anthology of love poems composed by many different people and passed on orally over a number of centuries before being written down, compiled, edited, and finally canonized. The Blochs, in contrast, hold that the Song's unity of theme, language, and content imply a single author, or at least a single editor who was himself or herself a poet of the highest order. Both Falk and the Blochs consider female authorship possible and even likely for all or part of the Song, because many verses are written from the Shulamite's point of view, she is portrayed sympathetically, and she and her lover speak as equals. Although there is no way of determining with certainty the authorship of the Song, the arguments for attributing it to women or a woman are plausible and more convincing than those that propose a female author for the Book of J.[7] But regardless of who composed the Song originally, both Marcia Falk, and Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, have created engaging translations that open the gates of time and language and enable us to step inside a garden of delight.

[7] See *The Book of J*, trans. by David Rosenberg, interpreted by Harold Bloom (New York, 1991).

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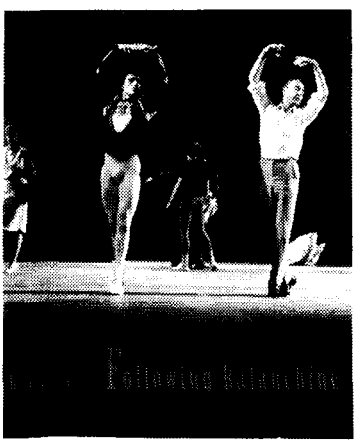

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TED KOOSER

Poet

Mine is the craft of loss,
but I am no better
at losing than you. My skill

is in finding the edges
of sorrow and folding them in,
as in the art of origami,

wherein you take a paper
by each of its corners
and fold these in, then take

the four new corners
and turn these in again
until in your hands

is something new, a crane
or frog, a diversion.
But the bird cannot fly

for the grief in its feathers,
nor the frog hop away
on empty legs. My losses

are as yours, insoluble,
but may I make a gift for you,
perhaps a paper teardrop?

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Lawn Chairs

All summer the wind has had its way
with our three yellow lawn chairs,
pushing them over, making them kneel
with their rusty bottoms exposed
to the rain, filling their seams
with dust and seeds. To hose them down
was merely to water the little gardens
the wind was so busily putting in,
and by fall, in one, a tiny elm
was cheerfully waving a tiny leaf.

Now it is once again October.
Whatever has grown in each of us
has flowered or failed. With the help
of my wife, I put the lawn chairs
into the loft of the barn,
one of us lifting them up,
feeling the heavy tug of the wind,
the other leaning far out from above
to catch them by their yellow shoulders
and help them on into the shadows.

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A Midwinter Letter

It has been snowing all morning,
light flakes, none of them ready to rest.
They dance against the gray-green cedars
beyond the window, each snowflake
easy to pick out and follow,
enjoying itself, lifting and gliding,
playing for time against the inevitable.

On the windowsill, a photograph
of my mother at eighty, strong and confident,
blue dress, a simple string of pearls.
With each year she looks more like her father
who lived to be nearly one hundred.
Both of them smile at me out of her face
and I can feel others standing behind them.
I lift on their breath and sail on.

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NEAL BOWERS

The Age of Surrender

for Nancy

We must now say good-bye
to all the places we will never go,
to the shimmering, unknown cities,
whole countries missed,
vastness of fields and mountains,
the air we might have breathed there
waiting for other lungs.

Good-bye, as well, to everything
we will not do, our bones
shaped by the cast of years
to match these lives alone,
our hearts, too, suited
to the daily lift.

Who we are not
is our surrounding medium,
the space that touches and sustains
and holds us here
exactly as we are, together,
shedding our final strangeness
after all these years.

Good-bye, then, to unread books
and everyone unmet,
to all the dreams
of being someone else—
ourselves, of course, but different.
Good-bye, my love, hello.

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MICHELE WOLF

Keep Going

I was led to the trees, as if someone with muscle
In her walk had pushed me. Heading
To the leaves—regal, molten with their final
Chance to breathe, Indian summer—I stopped
By the crowd shouting at the blue police barricade,
Mile 25. This was the moment, one of 26,000
Runners, you presented yourself, dazed and red-faced,
Soldiering on. Although I was too astonished
To speak, your name issued from me, the same way
A cut bleeds, the eyes allow us to see.
"Keep going!" I shouted, again without forethought.
Slowly, your mouth fashioned my name, then
You continued, working to control your body,
Pushing on through a life out of control.

"I can't sit still," were your words, so urgent,
Serving as much as a plea and apology as a good-bye.
Yet it is the way we would sit together
For which I remember you. We would talk only briefly
Or not talk, leaning against each other while the light
Turned to darkness over the Hudson, until we were sitting
In darkness, and one of us, without any active thought,
Might quietly speak, or rise to turn on a light,
Or move closer to the other, as if the darkness
Itself had spoken and thought were held away
Like an outsider, standing outside a barrier,
And we were not going anywhere. We were inside.

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The Diorama

After twenty-five years it is faded, rather
As we are—the Japanese teahouse we fashioned
With satin-kimonoed dolls that fit
In the dip of a child's palm, rice bowls
Balancing toothpick bits for chopsticks,
The miniature English tea set—saucers, cups,
A sugar bowl and a creamer. Authenticity
Was not our intent here. We used what we had
And built a house in the way we imagined it,
A mother and daughter side by side,
At a time when a mother shapes the walls
Of a daughter's universe, before a girl,
Without need for ceremony, ventures
Out to a world of her own. You saved
The world we had built in a box
In the way you have stayed in the house
Of my childhood, a faded
House you have never maintained yet never
Left, the same way you mothered your children
Once we had outgrown the diorama, once no
Room left any doubt your marriage had died.

When you set out the box, you brought back
A house so vivid that, not long after,
When I spotted a woman who so resembled you,
Except for her eyes, as blue and open as skylights,
Except for the dance in her face when she smiled,
I thought she could be you. I even
Introduced myself, but of course
There was nothing to say. She was
Not you. Your eyes are hazel. And Japan
Is not an imagined place but a real land,
Of compact, fuel-conservative cars, of stunted
Trees, carefully pruned and bound
By a strict definition of beauty, cultivated
In planters. Japan is a land of green tea.

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Seizure

You spoke in a language only you could imagine
Or fathom: "I have to go blankus the eptor"—
Your singsong cadence and syntax making sense.
So this was what it meant, talking in tongues.
You hadn't forewarned me, the evening
Of our first coupling, that this sometimes happens
In your sleep. You awoke with a growl, unable
To hear or see, your whole body stiffened,
Shaking as if invaders had fixed on
Evicting you from your skin, gasping
As if in the last tremors of life.
I thought I had lost you.
Yet soon you emerged from this darkness,
Consumed by a foreign speech. When you finally
Awakened, every muscle sore, exhausted,
You stammered "I'm sorry," a rush of soft sounds
Echoing, trailing off. Profoundly embarrassed,
You lacked any recollection of what had passed.
Seizure: Needing sleep, you drifted off,
Holding me to you. I didn't dream that night,
In some strange tongue or any other.
Over the distance, I rested
The flesh of me next to the field of you,
The entire hidden field, sparking and rumbling.

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BRADLEY OMANSON

Class

was what she hoped for a little more of
but wasn't holding her breath—it was something
in short supply on the farm and valued
accordingly, like seedcorn or credit—
a thing to be cultivated with care
and hoarded like so many precious jars
of late-summer fruit. Class was a velvet
embroidered chair where the men never sat
in a parlor always dusted—if only
she'd had a parlor—so sometimes Class
was only a corner of yard fenced off
from the hogs where, tucked among onions,
she cherished a hidden bed of alyssum.
Class was keeping her six daughters clothed
in handmade dresses, not hand-me-downs,
while strictly admonishing every lapse
of grammar or bearing or common grace.
Class was a lyric by Longfellow learned
as a child and softly recited
(on mornings when all the men were afield)
to a disapproving chorus of hens.
Class was a few stolen moments sitting
alone at the kitchen table, slowly
turning a page in the WARD'S catalogue.
Class was something to do with great cities,
with distances travelled by night, a wordless
prayer in her child's heart and a silvery
horn from an east-bound express suspended
above the fields as she drifted to sleep.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Mathematical Drama

How intellectual is Tom Stoppard? Too clever by half, at times, when the playwright seems less interested in his characters and their predicaments than in showing off his wit and extensive reading. Still, in a theatre where anti-intellectualism reigns, and where the repeated use of the word "fuck" is considered talented dialogue, Stoppard is always refreshing. No other playwright today seems much interested in the life of the mind, especially the mathematical and scientific insights that have completely changed our traditional views of the world.

Stoppard's interest in mathematical quirks goes back to the first scene of his first play. As *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* opens, Guildenstern tosses heads with a coin ninety-two consecutive times, noting that such a sequence is no less improbable than any other. Most of Stoppard's subsequent works touch on some mathematical or scientific enigma. The hero of *Jumpers* ruminates on Cantor's proof and Zeno's paradox. The title of *Squaring the Circle* expresses an ancient mathematical puzzle. *Hapgood*, successfully performed this past winter at Lincoln Center, explores the perplexities of quantum theory.

The sources for *Hapgood* are two popular works on physics, Richard Feynman's *Lectures on Physics* (drawn from lecture notes for Feynman's freshman physics course at Cal Tech) and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. The play itself, however, is a straightforward spy thriller like one of John le Carré's novels. In the mid-1980s, before the demise of the Soviet Union (a great loss to spy novelists!), a British Intelligence agency led by a woman named Hapgood is attempting a counter-espionage operation to intercept the leaking of information to the Soviets from an atomic scientist working on an anti-missile project. The scientist, named Kerner, is a Russian who apparently defected to the West, but was actually a "mole" or "sleeper" spy. The British discovered this, and turned him into their own double agent. They now suspect him of being a *triple* agent, still loyal to the Soviets.

A prologue to the play depicts a sting operation in the men's room at a London swimming pool. Kerner enters and leaves a briefcase in one of four empty cubicles, which is picked up by a Russian agent. The British intended to substitute a duplicate briefcase, complete with homing device, while retrieving Kerner's case, which contains impor-

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tant microfilmed data. The whole operation goes wrong, with the Soviets grabbing the microfilm, while the booby-trapped briefcase ends up at the bottom of the pool. It turns out that there were two Soviet agents, twins, with the British following the wrong one.

The Byzantine plot ultimately involves two more sets of twins, one real and one faked, with two people pretending to be one, and, later, one pretending to be two. This world of electronic eavesdropping, double and triple agents, and complex layers of deception recalls the equivocal domain of subatomic particles. Kerner, the scientist, makes the comparison:

> The particle world is the dream world of the intelligence officer. An electron can be here or there at the same moment. You can choose; it can go from here to there without going in between; it can pass through two doors at the same time.

The trouble with this intriguing metaphor is that it does not really apply to the circumstances of the play; the briefcase was *not* in two places at the same time. Earlier, Kerner had applied Niels Bohr's notion of complementarity—that light must be considered simultaneously as both waves and particles, however much this violates common sense—to the ambiguities of his own position, saying, "You get what you interrogate for. And you want to know if I am a wave or a particle." But it seems clear enough that Kerner is not a triple agent; furthermore, the enigma of his position is not the result of "what you interrogate for" (as it is with light, where the nature of the experiment determines the kind of results), but of the trickery with twins. The play is amusing, but Kerner's long-winded physics lessons, taken almost verbatim from Feynman and Hawking, seem merely tacked on to the plot. Among all the characters, only Kerner is actually involved with science, which gives a perspective on the action but is never an urgent matter within it. Even for Kerner, science is of less immediate importance than his political or personal concerns; it even turns out that he originally had an affair with Hapgood, and fathered her child, now aged eleven. If Stoppard had turned Kerner into a nonscientist (like the real-life sleeper spy Anthony Blunt, who was in charge of the Queen's own art collection in the 1960s), dropping all the physics lectures, the play would still be perfectly successful as a spy thriller.

Well, perhaps not all that successful. The play failed when it was done in London in 1988, because critics and audiences found it confusing—not the physics, which remains at a very pop level, but the plot, which is so complicated that I had to buy the text afterwards to figure it out. The New York production seemed much clearer, perhaps because by then I was familiar with the text, or perhaps because the performances were so well done that I did not care so much about all the intricate details. At any rate, *Hapgood* was a hit at Lincoln Center, with a run that had to be extended several times.

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Stockard Channing was smashing in the title role, intelligent, witty, and forceful; she was also so effective as Hapgood's coarse, foul-mouthed, fake twin sister that the audience never caught on until the truth was later revealed. I well remember Channing twenty-seven years ago when she was an undergraduate performing at the Loeb Theatre at Harvard, twenty pounds heavier than she is today and much less proficient, but with a twinkle in her eye that has served her well ever since. She has become one of our best stage comediennes, often performing triumphantly in British imports—even those that failed at home.

The rest of the cast, all with impeccable accents, were praiseworthy, especially Josef Sommer as Blair, Hapgood's ominous supervisor. Jack O'Brien directed, while Bob Crowley designed superb, minimalist settings, which made imaginative use of an opaque projector, for the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre, Lincoln Center's tiny alternative performance space.

In its main theatre, the Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center continued its Stoppard season with a production of his *Arcadia* in early spring. The play is about mathematical Chaos Theory, but unlike *Hapgood*, it has science at its center. Three of the principal characters are mathematicians, while all the characters have passionate ideas about math or science, including a literary don who loathes them. ("Quarks, quasars—big bangs, black holes—who gives a shit? How did you people con us out of all that status? All that money?") *Arcadia* is an expansive piece, jumping back and forth in time, dealing with sex, literature, and landscape architecture as well as math, but unified by the notion of scientific quest; even the don is researching a conundrum about the life of Lord Byron with methods that turn out, willy-nilly, to be scientific.

The play starts in 1809, in a large country house in Derbyshire. The young lady of the manor, Thomasina Coverly, aged thirteen, is a mathematical prodigy. Her tutor, Septimus Hodge, a recent graduate of Cambridge where he was a classmate of Byron, is teaching her both Latin and math, recalling that happier time when knowledge was not divided and subdivided and specialized as it has become with us. "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" asks Thomasina innocently. Undaunted, Septimus replies, "Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef." This amusing evasion will not stand up to Thomasina's shrewd questioning, however; she has the scientific method ingrained, testing all hypotheses against reality. Septimus shamefacedly reveals the true meaning of the phrase, and the event that stimulated it, his sexual encounter with the wife of a poetaster acquaintance in the gazebo of the estate.

There is an ongoing renovation of the estate's garden, from the eighteenth-century "natural" style to the new, romantic "picturesque" style, which is causing even more disruption and concern than Septimus' sexual adventures, which extend to Thomasina's mother.

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The play does not dwell on the renovation, however, nor on the sex, but jumps to the present, in the same room of the same house. A novelist and historian, Hannah Jarvis, is researching the garden for a book. Her friend and wooer Valentine, a scion of the Coverly family, is a mathematician using Chaos Theory to analyze the grouse population on the estate over the previous century. Chaos Theory uses iterative functions, in which the results of a formula are fed back into the same formula, over and over; it is thus suited for analyzing "any phenomenon which eats its own numbers—measles epidemics, rainfall averages, cotton prices," or grouse population, which can be inferred from the game books recording the results of hunting, though it involves imaginative guesswork: "Like a piano in the next room, it's playing your song, but unfortunately it's out of whack, some of the strings are missing, and the pianist is tone deaf and drunk." Stoppard's theory of the scientific method displays its vital connection with imagination that thoughtful scientists from Einstein onward have recognized, that science is not just a matter of recording facts, but of constructing hypotheses and refining them until they fit the facts.

Benedict Nightingale, an ambitious literary don from a minor university, is also at the estate, trying to prove that Lord Byron murdered the poetaster, named Chater, in a duel. On meager evidence, he publishes his hypothesis, which makes the newspapers and gets him on television. Nevertheless, we know that he is dead wrong, because we have seen what happened to Chater ourselves in the flashback scenes; soon Nightingale knows it too, when further evidence discloses that Chater went off to Martinique as a botanist (the crossover between poetry and science seeming perfectly natural at the time, though bizarre now), where he died of a monkey bite. Nightingale would of course like to suppress the new evidence—no scientist he!—but too many people know about it, so that his ambitions are squashed.

Valentine never proves *his* theory about grouse either, but in his researches he comes to realize that Thomasina had actually discovered Chaos Theory a century and a half before anyone else, and that Septimus had spent the rest of his life trying to work out its implications, an impossible task before the age of the computer. Only Thomasina's scientific quest is fruitful in the play, but she died young and unrecognized. Despite this sad fact, the play throughout is light, funny, and romantic, the best literary treatment of science that I have ever seen or read.

Much to my surprise, the Lincoln Center production of *Arcadia* turned out to be better than the one I had seen in London. (I saw the London version after it had been running for a long time, however, with changes from the original cast.) The direction, by Trevor Nunn, and the designs, by Mark Thompson, were unchanged, but the new cast were entirely American. Thompson's setting, designed for a

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proscenium stage, lost some of its pictorial beauty on the large, Vivian Beaumont thrust, but his costumes remained a delight.

The entire cast had acceptable accents, although they were sometimes defeated by the Beaumont's wretched acoustics. Otherwise, the entire cast was flawless. Jennifer Dundas played the difficult role of Thomasina with girlish charm, yet still gave a sense of great intelligence. Victor Garber performed Nightingale with brio, even getting that condescending nasal honk that British academics affect. Robert Sean Leonard, an actor I have usually found overrated, discovered *passion* in the role of Valentine. His English predecessor, perhaps because of the stereotype of mathematicians as bloodless, played him as merely glib, but Leonard gave him a great yearning, not just for recognition (like Nightingale), but for *truth*. Lincoln Center must be on a roll these days, performing England's most elegant contemporary playwright better than the English themselves!

In his new play, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, Steve Martin tries to write like Tom Stoppard, and partially succeeds. Set in a Paris bar, the Lapin Agile, in 1904, it brings together the young Albert Einstein and the equally young Pablo Picasso (they were born two years apart, in 1879 and 1881), along with a half dozen acquaintances and bar regulars. There is a good deal of playful discussion of modern art and modern science, and the relation between the two, plus an equal amount of discussion of the relation between the sexes; both geniuses are shown to have an active interest in women. (A recent deflating biography, *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*, by Roger Highfield and Paul Carter, suggests that this was true of Einstein, while Picasso's active sex life was never a secret.) The denizens of the bar also speculate about the new century, making some hilariously inaccurate predictions: "Led by Germany, this will be known as the century of peace. . . . The Wright brothers will be long remembered for the invention and manufacture of a low-calorie fudge." In a final theophany, Elvis Presley appears as a visitor from the future. The characters toast the twentieth century, when "no political movement will be as interesting as the movement of the line across the paper, the note across the staff, or the idea across the mind." This time, we are supposed to believe, the prediction is correct.

The discussions of art and science, the shift between past and present (with amusing anachronisms), the use of actual historical figures (as in Stoppard's *Travesties*), and the lighthearted wit all show the Stoppard influence, but Martin is less knowledgeable than Stoppard, and less astute. Anxious to provide an objective correlative for Einstein's genius, Martin turns him into a whiz at mental arithmetic, dazzling the bartender by doing the bar accounts in his head. This is different from the more common cliché of having him scribble formulae on a blackboard, but is equally phony; Einstein had no such ability, and would not have thought much of someone who did. The program notes that Einstein in 1904 was about to publish his Special

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Theory of Relativity, but the dialogue has him spouting from the *General* Theory, formulated a decade later, and even prattling about a Unified Field Theory, something he never successfully discovered, try though he might. And perhaps I may be forgiven if I do not find Elvis quite in the same league with Picasso or Einstein; even his most rabid fans would have to admit that pop culture and high culture are very different things, which do not serve for such a glib comparison. But perhaps my misgivings are like complaining that champagne lacks vitamins; *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* is fun, and goes down easy.

The play was originally performed in Chicago by the Steppenwolf Company, and later in Cambridge, Massachusetts by the American Repertory Theatre. It was then remounted for a production at the Westwood Playhouse in Los Angeles, where I caught it in January. There were many flaws. As is common in LA, the actors were cast according to their looks rather than their ability to speak. Visual type casting usually works for movies, where vocal demands are minimal, but can be a trap in the theatre, a far more verbal medium. Thus, when Andrew Hawkes entered the café as Pablo Picasso, he looked quintessentially Spanish and artistic, his strong, lean body and intense eyes riveting the audience's attention. When he began to speak, however, sounding like a male Valley girl, he lost us in an instant.

The rest of the cast were somewhat better, especially Rick Snyder, lively and funny as Einstein, and Joe Sagal, very convincing as Elvis (though he did not have to sing). Scott Bradley designed a cramped, overly symmetrical set, while Randall Arney's direction was too broad and busy. Perhaps taking the word "Agile" in the title too seriously, he made the piece often seem like a modern dance class. The play will probably appear in New York this coming season, with luck in a better production.

The New York Shakespeare Festival is generally no place to see Shakespeare these days. They perform him so rarely—and then so badly—that the Festival really ought to take a new name. Nevertheless, I could not resist the opportunity to see Ron Leibman, whose bravura performance as Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* I shall never forget, play Shylock.

In the event, Leibman gave a credible, if rather subdued, performance as Shakespeare's Jew. He is a beautiful speaker, with a resonant voice, performing here with a slight Yiddish accent to emphasize Shylock's strangeness in the Venetian world. The costume designer, Catherine Zuber, gave him a black gabardine with a gold circle on the left breast (why not a star of David?) to make the same point. Leibman's delivery was a little rushed, but he had a good sense of Shakespeare's rhythms, and of the ambiguities of the character.

The rest of the cast, however, were mostly the kind of bumblers that the NYSF favors; only Byron Jennings, sad, honest, and clear as Antonio, and Earle Hyman, tall and dignified as the Duke, were

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satisfying. John Arnone's settings looked cheap, with no distinction at all between the commercial world of Venice and Portia's stately Belmont. Barry Edelstein's woozy direction showed an instinct for the undramatic; for example, Shylock's knife in the trial scene was so small I thought he was going to trim Antonio's fingernails. The action was generally slow, with many dead pauses; I thought perhaps Leibman's rushing may have been the result of his impatience with the rest of the cast. He really deserves another shot in the role, with a genuine Shakespeare company, as opposed to the bogus one at the Public Theatre.

Joyce Carol Oates's lugubrious fiction has never interested me, but in recent years she has taken up playwriting, with modest success. In her latest piece, *The Truth Teller*, performed at Circle Rep, she even demonstrates a previously hidden sense of humor. The humor is as subtle as a lead brick, but then so was Aristophanes'. *Truth Teller* satirizes Wasp businessmen and politically correct academics, laboriously in the former case but incisively in the latter.

The play is set in Buffalo, New York, in the home of "Tiny" Culligan, a manufacturer of fences whose motto is, "Good fences make good neighbors." The irony of the slogan is lost on him, as is any kind of intellectual subtlety whatever; described as "a patriarchal old windbag," he makes Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt seem like a highbrow. He has been married for 35 years to his meek, submissive wife, Nora; their three grown children are Biff, Hedda, and Maggie. The literary allusions add up to nothing, however; only Maggie, "Miss Niagara Frontier of 1985," is anything like her namesake. Divorced from her husband Buckhead, whom the family mistakenly call "Fuckhead" or "Dickhead" (I told you Oates was unsubtle!), she is oversexed and underintelligent. Biff, as subservient as Nora and as stupid as Maggie, works for his father.

Not having seen her parents for five years, Hedda returns home for their thirty-fifth anniversary. She is accompanied by her boyfriend Saul Schwartz, an unemployed professor of "psychosociolinguistics." A politically correct monomaniac, he left Stanford to protest its failure to hire "a black lesbian radical gynocritic." When one finally got taken on, he could not go back, he explains, because "she took my place." The satire here may again seem exaggerated, but Oates, a professor at Princeton, knows whereof she writes. Hiring professors (at inflated rank and salary) because of their color, gender, sexual orientation, or fashionable anti-intellectualism has become all too common at many universities, including my own.

When Oates's satire is working, she can move easily from the conceivable (however silly) to the ludicrous. Thus, Saul's specialty of "intertextuality in the Kristevian sense" is all too tiresomely familiar, but when he is described further as "a fully deconstructed male," with Hedda as "a fully deconstructed female," we are off into cuckooland. Maggie's brainlessness extends to her twice having forgotten her

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infant in the cloakroom at the country club, but "It wasn't as if she didn't have claim checks for him." Tiny's anti-Semitism toward Saul, more scatterbrained than malicious, extends to his waving good-bye with a cheery "Oy vey!"

Truth Teller is overloaded with plot: Maggie makes a play for Saul, Nora (resembling Ibsen's heroine in action if not in personality) walks out on Tiny, Biff turns out to be a cross-dresser, while Tiny faces a wildcat strike at his factory, which Hedda resolves by using more linguistic mumbo jumbo. I laughed all the way through, but felt as though I were watching "Saturday Night Live" reruns at double speed. The production, directed by Gloria Muzio, was even heavier-handed than the script, with only Barbara Gulan effective in the role of Maggie. Everyone else seemed out to demonstrate what a fool he was playing (especially John Seitz, who made Tiny unbearable), but acting is never engaging or even genuinely funny unless the actor takes the character seriously. Neither Oates nor Muzio nor the cast liked these characters, on any level, which made *Truth Teller* into a TV sketch rather than a play.

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JOSIAH FISK

Houston Grand Opera

THE WORTHAM CENTER IN HOUSTON is a splendid place for opera. Designed by Eugene Aubrey and finished in 1987, it sits grandly and alone on a tree-studded plaza. Inside, escalators lift you to the midst of the high lobby with a giant arched window. (The literature claims the influence of Tewkesbury Abbey; the mind counters with Grand Central, but with the OTB windows graciously supplanted by coffee bars.) The place is full of people, and they look relaxed and happy. In Boston, the audiences look as if they've shown up out of duty; in Seattle, out of confusion. In New York they show up because it's what's *done*. In Houston, so it seems, people go to opera because they want to.

The lobby is not only high but large; it begins on one block and vaults the street to another. At its far end are the center's two houses. Brown Theater, tall and stubby, 2176 seats, is the perfect shape and size for full-scale productions. The stage is pleasingly low, and comes out a bit to meet you—or so it feels, anyway. Cullen Theater is steeply raked, more functional. Its capacity is easy to remember: 1066.

David Gockley came to Houston Grand Opera in 1973 and still runs it. Gockley put HGO on the map—literally, by helping to create the Wortham, and figuratively, by setting high production standards and mounting at least one attention-getting show a year. Premières have been a specialty: 15 in the last 20 years, including commissioned works by John Adams (*Nixon in China*), Philip Glass, and Sir Michael Tippett.

This past winter HGO outdid themselves. They not only premièred a commission, *Harvey Milk*, but unveiled a new production of *Porgy and Bess* and, for the tricentennial of Purcell's death, a new *Dido and Aeneas*—within the space of six days. To all of this the press was cordially invited. I am told some 80 critics came.

Dido, introduced to the world in a Chelsea boarding school in 1689, is famously regarded as being the first English opera—a category which in turn is famously regarded as not having realized it had been invented. The preference of the time was for lumpy mixtures of dance, theatre, and song, and that taste continued for the next two decades. When England finally did discover opera, it was the Italianate products of a visiting German, Handel. The Italian fever lasted from Handel's first visit in 1711 until well into the nineteenth century (at Covent Garden, all operas were performed in Italian until 1892).

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England's opera composers had their triumphs, but it wasn't until Vaughan Williams and Holst that Purcell found a tradition that acknowledged him as its forebear.

Dido, then, is somewhat isolated as an opera. But not as an entertainment. "A glorious variety show" is how Marshall Pynkoski, the director of this production, described *Dido* in a conversation, adding that Purcell's audience would have thought of opera as being neither very distinct from other genres nor manifestly superior. And as Pynkoski notes, the lumpy mixtures had their advantages. It's true that from a modern viewpoint they seem like crudely cobbled things, plotless parades of events in which farces and funerals find themselves cheek by jowl. But the modern viewpoint has been shaped, at least in part, by the knowledge of what opera eventually became. In some ways the entertainments allowed for more flexibility than opera. Events could be more literary, more spontaneous, more varied in dance and costume. For an audience that was educated, wealthy, and probably bored, it must have been a tonic to be yanked from one emotional response to another. *Dido*, opera or not, may still be seen as part of this tradition.

Pynkoski is co-artistic director, with the choreographer Jeannette Zingg, of Toronto's Opera Atelier (the Houston *Dido* was basically an Opera Atelier product). In talking about his approach to *Dido*, Pynkoski emphasized his belief that it was essential to treat it as a living work and not a museum piece. The goal of this production, he said, was to create something brand new using the aesthetic and stylistic references of the period.

Statements of this nature are often used as a sort of code, and are usually a warning that the director has found it easier to move the action to a meat-packing plant in Cleveland than to try to understand the piece or its context. In Pynkoski's case, the statements were being issued at face value. The production imported a French ensemble, Les Musiciens du Louvre, and their director, Marc Minkowski, to perform on period instruments. Zingg provided original choreography in Baroque style, although with more variety and athleticism than one commonly sees. William Schmuck's sets also honored period tastes. The ingredients were 14 columns, a rear screen, some draperies, and a couple of chandeliers, arranged differently for each act; simple but effective. Dora Rust-D'Eye's costumes were Baroque in shape, elaborate with drapes and tucks, but in the case of the dancers, made of a softly reflective silver material that picked up whatever hue Kevin Fraser's lighting aimed at them. It sounds perfectly tacky, but the execution was subtle enough that you might easily have thought you were seeing a different wardrobe in each scene.

Dido has significant textual problems. The oldest version of the score, from 1775, is missing chunks of music. There are also several spots where the score calls for the insertion of dances without providing the music or suggesting what it might have been. Conser-

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vative productions stick with what is securely Purcell, which makes for a lofty but truncated event. Pynkoski opted for a full and imaginative reconstruction, interpolating dances at the dozen or so points where they are indicated. Some of Purcell's music from other sources was conscripted. So were instrumental dances by contemporaries. And so too was an arrangement of the *folies d'espagne*, the "La Bamba" of its day, with castanets and finger cymbals played by two of the dancers.

Because even a well-larded *Dido* is too short by itself, the evening had begun with a staging of Jeremiah Clarke's 1695 *Ode on the Death of Henry Purcell.* Its expressive center is a funeral march—"Mr. Purcell's Farewell." It begins with a deathly slow, unadorned drumbeat and builds to a harmonic idea as wrenching and compelling as it is surprising. I know of nothing else quite like it before Britten. It is music to stop you in your tracks.

But there was a second surprise in store. As the last notes of *Dido* faded away, the drumbeat began again. The engraving of Purcell that had served as a backdrop in the Clarke reappeared, and the muted colors of the funeral march, with its drums and trumpets held to a *piano* (itself a stroke of genius in an era that used those instruments exclusively for flourishes), rose from beneath the empty stage. Purcell was dead; now, too, so was Dido.

What made this *Dido* so rewarding was that it felt curiously true to the spirit of Purcell's time, even though in many of its particulars it was deliberately inauthentic. The lighting was modern, as was the theater size (even the Cullen is more than twice the size of most Baroque theaters). The vocal styles were, arguably, more or less modern. The short length of the evening and the notion of putting these two pieces together as an honor to Purcell reflected a modern perspective. Surtitles were projected over the stage; a good thing on the whole. Minkowski led with a baton rather than from a harpsichord or violin. The 16 voices of the chorus, on risers to the left of the proscenium, at one point produced an echo effect by singing most inauthentically into folded hands (it worked, and wonderfully). The Sorceress was a baritone rather than a mezzo—a popular choice in recent recordings, and one perhaps sanctioned by history—but the vaguely campy staging of her (his?) scene was made for today's sensibilities. And there was an entire scene which might have been straight out of Gilbert and Sullivan: blue-suited sailors with wooden paddles, dancing and paddling about the stage while the principal sailor pranced about with an enormous galleon on his head.

Even a few years ago, a production like this would have been difficult. Historically informed opera stagings have been rare, and most have had to content themselves with the earnest labor of attempting to recover a lost art. The alternative has been the meat-packing plant approach, practiced with high cleverness by its best advocates, but ultimately telling us more about the director, and less about the work, than we wanted to know. The Houston *Dido*

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shows that a synthesis is possible. The glories of this production were not its performers *per se*, except perhaps for the best dancers. Although quite fine, all the singers showed minor flaws of one sort or another. The equally fine players never quite lost a certain boxiness of phrasing (musically, the *Dido* to beat is the unstaged version William Christie and Les Arts Florissants brought to this country two years ago). And yet the Houston *Dido* showed a spirit of confidence and fun, and a lack of self-consciousness, that are often woefully absent from Baroque opera productions.

If nothing else, this *Dido* suggests that the historically informed performance movement might at last be ready to venture beyond its old, sober cast of mind, and to venture as well beyond the manufactured coolness that seems to dog every effort to make old art popular. If so, it might not only gain a sense of humor, but a stronger sense of itself. Some within the movement have been quietly showing the way for years (they're not, for the most part, the largest names). It would be wonderful to think that their moment finally might be arriving.

Houston and *Porgy* go way back. It was HGO that gave the first complete performance of Gershwin's score in 1976, a performance still available on CD and still worth owning. The production toured 17 cities and 6 foreign countries, and won a Tony while it was on Broadway.

Between the opening of *Porgy* in Boston in 1935 and the first Houston production lay more than 40 years of rancor and misunderstanding. The problems began with perceptions of Gershwin's musical identity. Classical music circles saw him as a Broadway or jazz musician, even in his concert pieces (a number of conductors refused to touch his scores). Jazz musicians of the time mostly respected Gershwin, but couldn't see him as a jazz musician; for one thing, he didn't improvise. His reputation on Broadway was a further problem for both camps, though in the meantime his desire to be seen as a classical composer made Broadway nervous too. Then there was the race issue: what's a nice Jewish kid doing writing an Afro-American opera?

Boston was planned as a place to work out the bugs before the show faced the New York critics. But the week in Boston was more of a salvage operation than a fine-tuning. According to the former record executive and television personality Mitch Miller, Gershwin was highly involved in the project, doing all the orchestration himself and attending all the rehearsals. But he was forced to start backpedalling even before the show opened. The piece was too long; cuts had to be made. More sections were dropped after opening night, including the entire first scene. The audience, it was felt, wasn't ready for a show that didn't have a big, energetic curtain raiser. Miller's source is his own experience: he was the oboist in the *Porgy* orchestra. He was twenty-three and just married. The Boston tryout of *Porgy* was the couple's honeymoon.

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Porgy has never been exactly neglected. The first revival was as early as 1938, and some of its songs—"Summertime," "I got plenty o' nuttin'," "It ain't necessarily so"—were popular almost immediately. But audiences were seeing heavily trimmed versions, and until the 1950s, they were mostly versions that tried to conceal *Porgy*'s operatic ambitions.

The past two decades have changed that dramatically. The difficulty for *Porgy* today is not achieving identity but preventing the ossification of it. The new Houston *Porgy* sidestepped that problem rather than confronting it—partly a matter of wisdom, partly one of necessity. The Gershwin estate places strict limitations on productions of *Porgy*, which is why you never see it transposed to another time or place. No doubt the stipulation rankles directors, but it does force them to look inside the piece itself for what they need to make it come alive.

The production offered one important first: the director, Hope Clarke, was an African-American. Clarke made her professional debut as a dancer in the original production of *West Side Story*, worked her way to being a principal with Alvin Ailey, did the choreography for *Jelly's Last Jam*. Clarke's grasp of *Porgy* was sympathetic and sure. Perhaps her main contribution was to add some segments of African-style drumming, particularly in the picnic scene—a sound move both artistically and historically.

The cast members, all 21 of them, turned in strong performances. And everyone looked the part! Alvy Powell was a hulking Porgy, Marquita Lister a sizzling Bess (in a high-slit dress), Stacy Robinson her match as Crown, robust pectorals gleaming from under his torn shirt. The surtitles were less necessary here than in either of the other operas. Curiously, the surtitles had been largely shorn of dialect, while the singing retained all but the most offensive examples (like "debbil" for devil). Both kept the original syntax. The sets showed us a Catfish Row of faded elegance, but elegance nonetheless (the point seemed to be that this was a community of workers and families, not down-and-outs). John DeMain and the HGO Orchestra handled the music with exemplary skill and energy. After Houston, *Porgy* travels to nine other co-funding opera companies. They're in for a treat.

How to explain the trouble with *Harvey Milk*? It isn't where you'd first expect it—in the basic craftsmanship. The librettist, Michael Korie, and the composer, Stewart Wallace, have worked together before. Both are certainly gifted. The project was shepherded along by Gockley himself, the production given a generous budget.

And the subject—all the right ingredients, a natural for the stage. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man to win public office in the United States. His story has timeliness, familiarity, political relevance. Surprises, too. Until the age of thirty-nine Milk was in the closet, a Wall Street analyst and Goldwater Republican. Then he left his career, grew a ponytail, moved to San Francisco. He ran for city supervisor three times without winning. In 1977 Milk transformed

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himself again. He lost the ponytail, taught himself the hardball rules of politics. This time he won. But his greatest fame came with death: in November of 1978, Milk and Mayor George Moscone were assassinated in city hall by a disaffected fellow supervisor, Dan White.

Timeliness and political relevance, but dimensions of the epic as well—self-discovery, transformation, heroism, martyrdom. And details, positively sublime in their timing and their symbolic potency. Milk loved opera, and went to see *Tosca* the night before he was killed. He anticipated his murder, recording not long beforehand a tape "to be played only in the event of my death by assassination." White was a made-to-order villain: an ex-cop, a family-values conservative who murdered in cold blood and blamed it on too much junk food (it was White's lawyers who concocted the infamous "Twinkie defense").

Harvey Milk fits all of this in and more. The first act shows us the young Harvey (as Milk's character is called), his cautious mother, and his first encounters with gay men and gay-bashing policemen. The Wall Street years are a campy set piece, with a spoof of the Supremes by a trio of closet lovers. Act II is Harvey in the Castro with his new companion, Scott. It's Scott who persuades Harvey, in a scene in bed, to cut his ponytail. The act ends with Harvey's election.

Act III belongs to Dan White. It opens with the Board of Supervisors in action, replete with a sassy Dianne Feinstein. Dan White sings a nostalgic aria about his old neighborhood. Later we see him at home, working up a lather because his family can't live on his supervisor's salary. And we see both assassinations, followed by a candlelight procession.

Some of these are compelling moments. In the first act, Harvey goes to see an opera at the Met (symbolized by a giant photo of Callas). He's just a kid, he's there alone, but he's in standing room, which is a gay cruising ground. Without knowing why, he stares up at these "men without wives," finds himself wondering who they are. At this moment we know what's happening to Harvey, and the men around him know. But Harvey doesn't. It is an exquisite depiction of the final moments of sexual innocence, and it's made more exquisite by the way it insists on the alone-ness of Harvey even as he stands amidst the throng he is about to join. This scene, and the assassination scene, are moments of bona fide opera. The whole apparatus of production, the calculations of the librettist and composer, all recede into the background, and the audience is left alone with the illusions the opera has created.

There is a third scene that might have ranked with these two, the scene in bed. But where the symbolic and the personal dimensions maintain equal balance in the other two scenes, the symbolic overpowers in the bed scene. The dialogue keeps turning moral and uplifting (Scott: "Always remember who you are"), and when it turns back to being personal, it's not inwardness we get, but sentimentality ("Just remember that warm night in June"). When Scott cuts Harvey's

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ponytail, it's clear that it symbolizes Harvey's loss of political naïveté. But in case you missed that, the scissors are handed to Scott by the Messenger, a white-clad figure who suddenly materializes in the bedroom.

In fact, almost every scene in *Harvey Milk* hits you over the head with the symbolic. The cop who entraps the young Harvey in Act I is played by the same singer who plays Dan White. The Harvey of the closet scene still wears the handcuffs that were slapped on the young Harvey in the entrapment scene. The last action in the opera is the young Harvey finally breaking the handcuffs. More ominous still is Harvey as Moses, an equation that is spelled out in no uncertain terms. What's left? Only the Holocaust, which is handled so heavily that the opera seems to be trying to say that gay oppression is tantamount to genocide.

The one exception is Dan White. Wallace and Korie bend over backwards to provide him a measure of humanity (tenor Raymond Very made White come alive). But even here, there's a problem: White is made human by being portrayed as misguided and out of touch. He's not sympathetic, only pitiable.

Wallace's music is problematic, too. It's accomplished, and its accessibility is shrewdly gauged, but it has no center. It flits from style to style, from Puccini to Broadway to chuggy John Adams-like textures, with no clue as to where its heart lies, or if it has one. Maybe it's simply trying too hard.

Ultimately, the problem with *Harvey Milk* is that it only has room for one character. Harvey is not merely central to the opera, he *is* the opera. No one exists except to the extent that they have to do with Harvey. Yet we hardly ever get a glimpse of Harvey the person, or the psychology of his remarkable transformations. He's too busy being a symbol (the wonderful baritone Robert Orth did everything he could with the part). And the opera's words and music and action are too busy telling us how we should feel about Harvey and his enemies to tell us much about them. It leaves the audience in a strange position. On the one hand, we're very much assumed to be in political agreement with the opera. Yet we're not quite trusted to reach the right conclusions on our own.

The original concept for *Harvey Milk* came from the director John Dew, and it was for a musical. It might have worked. Having basically one character isn't a problem for a musical. It would have rescued the story from its own ponderousness. It could have been truly outrageous, rather than the essentially conventional operatic treatment Wallace and Korie provided.

In the closet number, in a couple of raucous street scenes, and in the tossed-off cleverness of many of Korie's lines, you can spot the ghost of that concept peering through. For right now, it seems, that's as much of it as we're going to see.

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BERT CARDULLO

Mirabile visu et dictu

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS THEMES ON THE SCREEN sufficiently reveals the temptations one must resist in order to meet simultaneously the requirements of cinematic art and of truly religious experience. Everything that is exterior, ornamental, liturgical, sacramental, hagiographic, and miraculous in the everyday observance, doctrine, and practice of Catholicism does indeed show specific affinities with the cinema considered as a spectacular iconography, as a kind of miracle in itself. But these affinities, which have made for the success of countless films, are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them. I'm thinking here of Stations-of-the-Cross movies, saints' pictures replete with miracles, and priests' or nuns' stories. Almost everything that is good in the domain of religious film was created not by the exploitation of the patent affinities of Catholicism with the cinema, but rather by working against them: by the psychological and moral deepening of the religious factor as well as by the renunciation of the physical representation of the supernatural and of God's grace, except where such representation is both pervasive and authentically religious. In other words, although the austereness of the Protestant sensibility is not indispensable to the making of a good Catholic film, it can nevertheless be a real advantage.

The fundamental requirement of an authentic spiritual style, then, is that it be grounded in naturalistic simplicity, even abstraction, not in wide-screen pyrotechnics. The spirit resides within, in internal conviction, not in external trickery, and of course it resides there for laypersons as well as the clergy, although it's true that most religious films depict, if not Biblical scenes and the life of Christ, then the lives of saints (or saints-to-be) and clerics. For films about the triumph-cum-mystery of faith in secular lives, we must turn to the most Protestant of Catholic directors and the most Catholic of Protestants, Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer. To be sure, each man created works about saints and clerics, but each also attempted to portray the manifestation of divine grace, whether overtly miraculous or not, in the existences of ordinary people. And this mission of theirs has been taken up in our own godless era by filmmakers as different as the English and the French: Ken Loach and Eric Rohmer.

The appearance of God, or godliness, in a film by Ken Loach is something of a surprise, since Loach's socialism, even Marxism, doesn't exactly go hand in hand with a Christian view of the world.

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This English director's social consciousness, if not preachiness, has been on display, on television as well as the big screen, for almost thirty years. Lately Loach has been tempering the stridency of his militant vision with anarchic humor, which the workers of *Riff-Raff* (1992) use to lash out at a hostile world, insulate themselves from it, and draw us into it. Humor continues to palliate in *Raining Stones*, except that now it is yoked less to subversion of the Tory political order than affirmation of the Catholic (not Anglican) religious one.

From the start, *Raining Stones* links its comedy to a Christian theme. When we first see the unemployed protagonist, Bob Williams, and his best friend Tommy, they are out on the moors at dawn trying to steal a large, uncooperative sheep, which recalls the sheep-stealing shenanigans of that quintessential divine comedy from the Middle Ages, *The Second Shepherds' Play*. After they have caught and trussed the animal but failed to summon the courage to stick or bash it to death, the two men drive with it back to Manchester in Bob's van, whose cab appropriately features a crucifix. There they deliver the sheep to a "friendly" butcher, although for a price that disappoints these desperate characters, and all three begin the job of slaughtering it. The very next scene confirms the symbolically ritualistic nature of that slaughter in addition to pointing up one of the reasons Bob is so desperate for cash: we see his seven-year-old daughter, Colleen, at a Catholic church receiving instruction from Father Barry in preparation for her first Holy Communion, at which, of course, she will ingest consecrated bread and wine as if they were the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Colleen's father is obsessed with the idea that his angelic little girl must receive the Sacrament in a new dress (and veil and gloves and shoes), which will cost approximately 150 pounds; Bob refuses to listen to his wife's and Father Barry's argument that clothes do not the Communion make, for he believes that his daughter's outfit is a beautiful gift to God rather than a mere adornment of the flesh.

This out-of-work plumber doesn't have 150 pounds to spend on such a godly gift, however, and his penury is soon compounded by the theft of his van outside a pub. Bob must have a van both to get work and to get *to* that work, so he borrows money from loan sharks to buy another and to purchase Colleen's Communion dress. Then he sets about comic-pathetically trying to earn some income with which to pay his debts: as a bouncer at a disco, where he's the one that almost immediately gets bounced for fighting with drug dealers, who presumably have free rein there; as a supplier of sod to a local landscaper, which he can't manage because stealing it from local bowling greens proves too difficult; and finally as the plumber he was trained to be, except that the only job he can get is at the Catholic church, where Father Barry presumes Bob will unclog his dirty drains free of charge! When the loan sharks stop getting their payments after a few weeks, they close in on Bob, wrecking his humble council flat—itself

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nearly a shrine to the Virgin Mary—and terrorizing his wife and child. He retaliates by stalking, then mugging his chief creditor in an attempt to seize and destroy the evidence for his debt; but in the process he accidentally kills the man.

Sick to his stomach and filled with remorse, Bob flees to the Catholic church—passing two crucifixes along the way—where he tearfully confesses to Father Barry. The priest gently scolds him for borrowing the money in the first place and gives him a drink, then abruptly declares, "Fuck the loan shark." The hard-working, God-fearing Bob must not confess to the police, insists Father Barry, for he has in fact done a good deed in murdering the vicious, bloodsucking usurer. He has achieved justice in the name of Christ and deserves his reward: forgiveness of his debt and sharing in his daughter's first Holy Communion. This Bob does together with his wife in the next scene, which concludes *Raining Stones*. Indeed, the very last shot is of Bob, not Colleen, devoutly ingesting the Eucharistic wafer. He has much to be blissful about—not only the dissolution of his debt but also the retrieval of his stolen van and the presence of Jimmy the atheistic Socialist at Colleen's Communion. Jimmy is the man who commiserated with Bob earlier at the Tenants' Association Hall by saying, "When you're a worker, it rains stones seven days a week." Well, not on this Sun-day morning, and not for this man who has been touched by God's grace rather than been crushed beneath a hail of stones.

The message of *Raining Stones*' Christian humanism, then, is less that celestial bliss awaits the virtuous proletariat after death than that, in a depressed economy, God helps those who help themselves. The otherwise pious Bob Williams commits the mortal sin of murder, or at least manslaughter, and a Catholic priest wondrously endorses that killing as an implement of social change; then God himself endorses it by having—of all people—the police report the recovery of Bob's stolen van while he is celebrating his daughter's first Communion. Bob is a believer who acts in good faith, and his belief is rewarded even if he still doesn't have a job at the end of *Raining Stones*. Who are we to doubt the reality or plausibility of what we have seen? To question the higher comfort of spiritual certitude as opposed to material wealth, if not the active hand of God in the affairs of men? To deplore the militancy of a clergy increasingly fed up with spiritual rationalizations of material poverty? To disbelieve the paradox of fervent Catholics like the Williamses who practice birth control inside the home and thieving crowned by violence outside it?

Our belief in the magical action of *Raining Stones* is, as you might guess from my introduction to this chronicle, helped not hindered by the naturalistic authenticity of its writing, its cinematography, and its acting. The script, by Jim Allen, makes no attempt to dilute, for the purpose of wide accessibility, the regional rhythms, accents, and locutions of the characters. This makes for some incomprehensibility but it adds to the air of religious mystery surrounding the otherwise

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lucid shape of the narrative, in much the same way as the Latin Mass does for worshipers who understand the significance of what they are seeing if they do not understand the meaning of many of the words. Barry Ackroyd's color cinematography and camera work are just what they need to be: dreary if not bleary-eyed, simple but not spectral. Stewart Copeland's score is at once jaunty and melancholy, not, thank God, awe-inspiring or spiritually uplifting in that gushy way familiar from religious spectaculars. And the actors are all good enough though—because?—none of them is really professional. (A few have done some acting here and there.) Professional actors might have spoiled this ingenuous story out of a desire to create "psychologies" for their characters, or by bringing a worldliness to their roles that those roles could not bear in a film that invokes this world only to transcend it. To be sure, Ricky Tomlinson, who plays Tommy, is an earthy, even ebullient contrast to the solemn if not supernal Bruce Jones, who appears in the role of Bob Williams; but worldly—worldly-wise or, for that matter, world-weary—Tomlinson decidedly is not and couldn't be if *Raining Stones* wanted to retain its buoyancy.

Like Ken Loach, whose latest film, *Ladybird, Ladybird* (about the clash between single motherhood and Britain's welfare bureaucracy), has already been released, Eric Rohmer is prolific: a director-screenwriter since the early 1950s, he is, at age seventy-four, halfway through his third major series or cycle of films, *Tales of the Four Seasons*. Also like Loach, he encourages suggestions and improvisations from actors whom he rarely features twice, and he generally uses performers who aren't widely known if they are not precisely non-professional. This is because, again like Ken Loach, Rohmer is interested in the lives of ordinary people as magnified by the lens of his camera, not by the celebrity status of his actors. Unlike Loach, however, Eric Rohmer is not a political animal, his concern being chiefly with the fluctuations, even fibrillations, of love, with emotional dissection or distillation along a continuum rather than emotional upheaval that moves toward dramatic peak or climax.

As they did in his *Comedies and Proverbs*, the internal lives of women or, better, the inner promptings of their hearts continue to occupy this filmmaker in *Tales of the Four Seasons*, of which *A Tale of Winter* is the second to be completed after *Tale of Springtime* (1990). One might expect environment or setting to play a big part in the *Tales*, since their focus seems to be on the seasons as motivating factors in human behavior. However, to judge from *Winter* (since I have not yet seen *Springtime*), the visual punctiliousness for which Eric Rohmer has become known—but which he hasn't always employed felicitously—is absent. In its place we find a spiritual element or dimension, reminiscent of Robert Bresson, to complement Rohmer's Marivaux-like dramatization of the psychology of love. The spareness of Rohmer's cinematic style, with its restrained camera and unobtrusive editing, has long reminded me of Bresson's astringency; now his subject,

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though essentially comic in form, recalls Bresson's transcendence as well.

Félicié is one of those seemingly perverse, exasperating protagonists who come right out of Bresson. *A Tale of Winter* opens under the credits with a montage depicting this young woman on holiday at the seaside, where she is having a passionate affair with a man named Charles. By the end of the credits, Félicié and Charles are at the railway station saying good-bye with every intention of seeing each other again, but she accidentally gives him the wrong address and never hears from him. It is five years later when the film actually begins, back in Paris. Félicié, a hairdresser, has a four-year-old daughter called Elise—the fruit of her affair—but no Charles; she lives with her mother and shuttles between two suitors, a cerebral, sensitive librarian by the name of Loïc and the owner of the beauty salon where she works, the adoring but businesslike Maxence. Significantly, almost all of *A Tale of Winter* takes place between Christmas and New Year's, when Félicié is pushed into choosing between Loïc and Maxence, who has left his wife for her and wants to take her with him back to his hometown of Nevers, where he will soon open a new hair salon. One reason she finds the choice so difficult is that neither lover stirs her in the way the mere memory of Charles does; he is the one man she loved completely and he, or rather the possibility-next-to-inevitability of his return, still haunts all her amorous decisions.

Nonetheless, after explicating her dilemma, her *indecisiveness*, to her boyfriends, her mother, her sister-in-law—among whom the two men are surprisingly the most patient and understanding in the face of her seeming capriciousness-cum-opportunism—Félicié agrees to move with her beloved Elise to Nevers, where she will live with Maxence and work in his beauty shop. But she is there only a short time before returning to Paris, and what triggers her decision to leave is a trip with her daughter to a Catholic church to enjoy a Nativity scene. Now Félicié is not a true believer in the manner of Bob the workingman from *Raining Stones* and Loïc the intellectual—she does not attend Mass and, although she is against abortion, she says that this is for strictly moral, not religious reasons. However, her moment of clarification or illumination about her love-life—that she must remain true to her one true love, Charles—occurs while she is meditating, perhaps praying, in the Catholic church, and that moment of grace is reinforced once she is back in Paris by attending, with Loïc, a production of *The Winter's Tale*.

Shakespeare's tragicomic romance is set in a pagan era but, like many a medieval Christmas or Easter drama, its main theme is rebirth or resurrection, if not reincarnation, the forces of death and hatred in the play turning miraculously into those of life and love even as the old year becomes the new, or winter turns to spring. Indeed, the scene from *The Winter's Tale* filmed by Rohmer, and emotionally responded to by Félicié, is the final one of rebirth and reconciliation in which

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Hermione's statue comes to life before the overwhelmed Leontes, the husband who had wrongly accused her of adultery years before. Charles himself comes to life, or reappears, shortly after this performance as Rohmer first cuts several times to a mysterious stranger driving toward Paris, then shows Félicié miraculously running into and reuniting with this man—now revealed to be Charles—on a bus on New Year's Eve. The next day finds them at her mother's home, celebrating amidst family the birth of the new year as well as his return, the return of her "sailor," as Félicié calls him. Actually, Charles is a chef, appealing yet somehow different, and we may assume that Félicié and Elise will be moving with him to Brittany, where he is set to open a new restaurant.

Whose hand is at work in this conclusion, we may reasonably ask, almighty God's or that of mere chance? It is, of course, impossible to say for sure, but Rohmer nonetheless coyly presents us with the choice—albeit an extreme restatement of that choice—in a conversation between Loïc and Félicié following the performance of *The Winter's Tale*. After the purportedly unreligious Félicié tells Loïc of her illuminating visit to the Catholic church in Nevers, he recites Pascal's wager, which argues that you run a far greater risk if you disbelieve rather than believe in God. If you believe and it turns out that there is no God, what have you really lost?; whereas if you disbelieve and God does in fact exist, you will spend eternity in hell instead of heaven. Appropriately, it is the literal-mindedly pious Loïc—who finds the ending of *The Winter's Tale* "implausible" and who discounts the possibility of Charles's reappearance—who states the rationalist's calculating argument for believing in God and, by extension, in God's creation of the miracle at the end of *A Tale of Winter*. But Félicié is no such rationalist—"I don't like what's plausible," she declares; rather, she embodies the dark side of seventeenth-century French rationalism invoked philosophically in Pascal's own *Pensées*, dramatically in the plays of Jean Racine, and cinematically, prior to Rohmer, in the films of Robert Bresson. I'm speaking of Jansenism, which in its emphasis on predestination or fatalism, denial of free will in favor of God's will, and insistence upon salvation solely through God's grace as opposed to "good deeds," is much closer to the Protestantism of John Calvin than the Catholicism of Ignatius Loyola.

Félicié is more of a Jansenist than a Jesuit not only in her intuited conviction that she and Charles are destined to meet again, but also in her tacit belief that God is a silent or "absent" presence in the affairs of men whose will can never be understood. Perhaps God drove her to enter the church at Nevers and absorb His revelation; perhaps not. Perhaps God arranged Félicié's reunion with Charles on the bus as well as the prefiguration of that reunion in the production of *The Winter's Tale* she attends; perhaps not. Only He knows. Félicié doesn't reveal what she thinks about this subject, and in her silence may be imitating her God more than one might at first believe. We are left to

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determine for ourselves what happened or rather why it happened precisely in this way, and Eric Rohmer has thus managed to put us where he wants us: beneath heaven's abyss, trying to decide whether to play the game of chance and possibly cast our fate to the wind, or to trust in God's ultimate inscrutability and by implication that of his cinematic handmaiden.

As I suggested earlier, the cinematography of *A Tale of Winter*, by Luc Pagès, is nearly ascetic: what we see are Paris and to a lesser extent Nevers in winter, shorn of their picture-postcard or movie-travelogue beauty. There are no superficially inviting colors or backdrops on the screen in this film, as there have been in such "proverbial comedies" of Rohmer as *Pauline at the Beach* (1985) and *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1987). Because of the weather, we are indoors much of the time, where we should be for a film whose drama is largely internal and therefore requires our concentration on revelations of language and gesture. Accordingly, the actors have been chosen less for their look—for the sake of facial contrast and harmony, if not allure—than for the character, the substance, conveyed by the look. Paradoxically, I remember the faces of the principal players—Charlotte Véry (Félicié), Frédéric Van Den Driessche (Charles), Hervé Furic (Loïc), and Michel Voletti (Maxence)—quite well, not so much because those faces are memorable in themselves but because their *characters* are etched in my memory. The saturnine Rohmer has inspired ease and confidence in his actors, and they in turn have given inspired performances of deceptively "daily" characters before his reticent yet revealing camera.

As for music, there isn't much to speak of in this film that depends more on the musicality of language—especially the French language as it sounds to non-French ears—to create the saving grace of instrumental music as it liberates us from the transitory world of natural forms and practical concerns. Like the regional speech of *Raining Stones*, the "foreign" language of *A Tale of Winter* contributes in the end to the divinity of its (romantic) comedy, to a strangeness that suggests otherworldliness rather than mere oddness or eccentricity. And that otherworldliness is confirmed by each film's inclusion in its story of a child, a lamb of God, if you will, in search of its father. No matter that the father is an earthly one in *A Tale of Winter*, for prior to his reappearance Charles had been a strictly spiritual presence, through word and picture, in the life of his daughter. It is with a shot of Elise playing with other children, not of Félicié and Charles embracing, that Rohmer's film ends, as a reminder—like the final image of *Raining Stones* in which Bob Williams communes with the heavenly father to whom his daughter has been newly introduced—that we are all God's children.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Redefining an Art Form

LAST WINTER'S EMIL NOLDE PRINT RETROSPECTIVE at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the exhibition of Vassily Kandinsky's "Composition" series at the Museum of Modern Art in New York were two remarkably concise and vivid summaries of the new directions—similar in intention but different in realization—that modern art took in the early years of the twentieth century. Both artists have never enjoyed the popularity with the public of Picasso or Matisse, or even Braque or Klee, and the approach taken to them by art historians has been similarly equivocal. There is something belligerent and unknowable about the one, and too intellectually confusing and diverse about the other. ("A little loopy" was Michael Kimmelman's description of Kandinsky's philosophy in his *Times* review of the MoMA show, and most people would probably agree: Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Russian folklore, Schopenhauer, and Wagner *is* a curious mix of influences.) But that slipperiness can also be part of the appeal of Nolde and Kandinsky, who incidentally prepare us better for the tumult that came after them than many of their more ingratiating peers.

However desirable a full-scale retrospective of Nolde's work would have been, flamboyant paintings and all, the emphasis in Boston on the woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, and watercolors did justice to the range of this exemplary German Expressionist. One reason this was the case is that Nolde's prints are among the most "painterly" ever made; he didn't believe in a strict demarcation between the broad, brushy, fluid quality of oil and the tight, line-directed nature of printmaking. Looking at over one hundred of Nolde's steamers in the surf, frenzied candle dancers, dark views of Hamburg, and mask-like faces on paper isn't so very distant an experience from looking at his aggressive oil paintings of the same subjects. They tend to have large areas of tonal darkness, streaky texture, an agitated, foreboding energy. By the time he tried his hand at color lithography, beginning in 1913, he was successfully defining his figures as much by areas of color as by their contours. Though Nolde was quite secretive about his methods, and despite all the sophistication and technical dexterity required to complete images this fully realized, the key word here is *primal*. Nolde is one of many early twentieth-century European men for whom the artist's goal in his time was the exact opposite of the politician's, the missionary's, and the colonial merchant's—not to

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bring the glories of "civilized" Western culture and commerce to the darker regions of the world, but to infuse desiccated Western civilization (on the eve of the slaughter of the Great War) with the vitality and honesty of "the primitive." Elemental, even magical powers have been forsaken by European society, Nolde insists in his art, and he aims to remind us of that loss. His is also a body of work smart enough to imply, or acknowledge, the paradoxical nature of that quest. It is an *image* of primitive joy and wonder that is being offered, an image achieved by decidedly advanced technological means as well as elaborate craftsmanship.

Born in 1867, Nolde was inspired in his thirties by the example of Munch and van Gogh, later became a senior member of the avant-garde group *Die Brücke*, and before World War I traveled to New Guinea, Java, Burma, Japan, and Korea. An anti-academic from the beginning, he spent his life producing some of the most agitated, exuberant, emotionally heightened, and still-undervalued works of modern art, but it is not an accident that he missed out on a place at center stage. There was no room in his world for a carefully cultivated "school" of imitator-followers, and he was so focused on his own vision that he scarcely took in the nasty political realities of the thirties that almost engulfed him. What mattered was the beauty of the lined faces of his prophets and old servants, crags that have a sculptural depth and reverence; the mystery of his dancing women who trade identity for ecstasy and motion; the unstoppable surge of sky and flowers in his wet-in-wet watercolors, as pigments spread and bleed into paper like nature's own renewal. Next to the emotional commitment of this last of the Expressionists, Gauguin's interest in the art and life of the South Pacific smacks of the museum and the salon.

Emil Nolde, who died in 1956 just shy of his ninetieth birthday, was a late bloomer, not that that fact necessarily means much, and his naiveté about his Nazi countrymen was nothing short of stupid. But he still managed to create some of the more vigorous, cleverly constructed works of modern art—prints, watercolors, and oils—of the period between the turn of the century and the end of World War II. He also looks more impressive, less smooth and crowd-pleasing, on each occasion we have in America (never too frequent) to study him in depth. In the comprehensive "Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany" exhibition in Chicago three years ago, he was a standout, and in Boston last winter he gave the impression of someone who knew more about our life and times, and inner needs, than we have ever given him credit for.

If Nolde claims the more forbidding persona of the solitary German thinker, a kind of stubborn local genius despite his travels in Asia, Vassily Kandinsky appears to us as the ultimate cosmopolitan. In the black-and-white photographs of him in his early or late middle age (a splendid one was hung by the entrance to the show at MoMA), he could be taken for the prosperous Russian legal authority or

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talented ethnographer he was well on his way to becoming in his thirties, or for the Bauhaus eminence that he in fact became, or for anything we care to imagine—except the wild-eyed Bohemian artist of Romantic myth. Here is a man of substance—earnest, intellectual, even worldly. Yet he shared with Nolde a belief that art in his day had lost touch with its roots in passion and magic, had traded its soul for technical finish, the imprimatur of "culture," and a misguided notion of aesthetic pleasure. Rather than a simple, complacent treat for the eyes, Kandinsky was determined to create an experience both spiritual and visual.

Much of Kandinsky's thinking was bound to the notion that excessive interest in narrative had displaced painting's potential to evoke responses akin to those associated with music. The music analogy mattered to a fair number of painters circa 1910, but perhaps to no one as much as to Kandinsky. And that concept of a painting as a music-like "composition," an object of melody and dissonance, rhythm and motif, dealing with emotion and mood rather than anecdote, was the focus of the Museum of Modern Art's small, intense exhibition. It was a momentous occasion because this was the first time the "Composition" paintings, or what remains of the series, had been seen together; three were destroyed during World War II, one is owned by the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and has not traveled before now, and our knowledge of what these ten works meant collectively to the artist has heretofore been a patchwork experience. It is easy now to see why the series carried such weight for Kandinsky himself—in ambitiousness and in actual accomplishment, it places him in the forefront of his art form, succeeding at something that borders on the impossible. Thirty or so preliminary studies in oil, watercolor, charcoal, ink, and pencil were included in the show to hint at the painstaking, hardly whimsical process by which the works evolved. This is another way in which Kandinsky is like Nolde: the appearance of freedom and spontaneity was crucial—a symphony can't be laborious—but, obviously, its attainment was anything but carefree.

The Modern's catalogue and even its Education Department's brochure were vital in guiding us through the codes of these dense paintings which, for all their concern with color and sensation, are jampacked with images, vestiges of images, bits of incident and recurring themes, symbols and potential symbols. Some sort of commentary is called for because the seven existing Compositions aren't of a uniform style, having been painted over a thirty-year span from Kandinsky's early Fauve/Expressionist period, his more geometry-based Bauhaus years, and his final days as an expatriate in France during the time of Hitler's mad destruction of Kandinsky's two earlier homelands, Russia and Germany. On the other hand, there is a danger in having too helpful a written guide; on being informed about a pair of lovers here or another leaping horse there

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that the eye hasn't really or readily caught, we can get lost in deciphering the individual components ("so where is that damn second horse? I don't see it") and lose the larger point: we are meant to get the basic line, the central juxtapositions, and then let the melodies—or dissonances—unravel as they will. That the early Compositions deal with Arcadian themes, Biblical or folkloric, soon becomes clear enough, and that the later, more abstract works have to do with clamor and chaos, and a new kind of emerging order, is not impossible to accept. Kandinsky's "visual music" is tough going, though, and that is why it matters. The best of the artists intent on "making it new" were in effect alerting the museum- and gallery-goers of their time, the rich patrons and the eager students, that more was going to be expected of them. It was, for these artists, high time to move beyond the comforts of Realism and Impressionism.

Another aspect of modern art that both signalled a break with the past and foreshadowed our own situation today has to do with a force equivalent to Nolde's raw lyricism and Kandinsky's music-based exploration of the abstract. It is a quality we are usually able, even inclined, to ignore once we enter the specialized world of the museum—namely, vulgarity. The vulgarity of common life and the vulgarity of naked emotion, the seediness of popular culture and the discomfort of fierce, even hysterical anger: these are aspects of experience usually, or necessarily, made tame by the context in which modern man contemplates art. "Toulouse-Lautrec: Marcelle Lender in 'Chilperic' " at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and a small exhibition of Max Beckmann's prints at the Museum of Modern Art in New York were interesting, aside from the caliber of the work they displayed, for their insistence on our *need* to remember the troubled origins of so much of what we now find beautiful or worthwhile. For Lautrec, those origins were found in the parts of town and with the kinds of people that Lautrec collectors and other good folk would never be caught dead near. For Beckmann, they had to do with the nightmare of Germany between 1914 and 1945 and man's capacity for causing unspeakable pain.

The National Gallery's show, like the Kandinsky display, was a perfect example of what an institution can do in lieu of the blockbusters that have come to be prohibitively expensive: focus on a specific theme and a few key paintings, fill the galleries with related works and supplementary material, and trust that you are educating your audience every bit as effectively as with anything grander—because that is the case. The singer-dancer Marcelle Lender, star of the tacky operetta *Chilperic*, was an object of great fascination—obsession, really—to Lautrec in the mid-nineties, and in this exhibition we saw the result of his interest in the dozens of drawings and lithographs he made of her, culminating in the large painting owned by the National Gallery, *Marcelle Lender Dancing the Bolero in "Chilperic"*

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(1895). Read about *Chilperic* and Lender in the museum's brochure, before or after spending time with the lurid greenish light and the daffy figures who people the stage where the dear woman performs, and the distance between "high" and "low" has never seemed so artificial. It is the same with the Beckmann prints. We might take Lautrec's outré social habits for granted today, and everyone knows about the catastrophic effects of the war on Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, but we are losing something if we can't put ourselves in touch with these artists' predicaments—their wish to embrace topics previously deemed unsuitable for art and to sweat and strain their way to the right form in which to do so.

Beckmann, an immensely talented man, had it especially hard. How can mere images on paper even approach the reality of starvation and death, sexual degradation and nihilistic exhaustion? It can't be done, but he can make the moments spent in front of his art demanding and unpleasant enough to approximate, however tentatively, the sensation of his subject's pain. Avoiding the elegant draftsmanship Kathe Kollwitz sometimes displayed in her war pictures, avoiding the drollery of a George Grosz or an Otto Dix, Beckmann aims to lacerate as well as to depict laceration. If the four people at their dinner table in the lithograph *Hunger* (1919) from the portfolio series entitled "Hell" are starving by degrees, the angularity of every single form on the paper will clutch at us. The woodcut *Morgue* (1922), with its coffins and cadavers, is a dead-weight of black lines. The "Trip to Berlin" portfolio depicts striptease performers, tavern drunkards, and disillusioned salon folk in claustrophobic compositions from which we can only yearn to escape ourselves. Beckmann's achievement is rightly oppressive and anxiety-inducing, no place for the tourist from abroad looking for Sally Bowles and a lot of local color before things get serious.

The Bruce Nauman retrospective last spring also dealt with this ongoing issue of crassness and aesthetic challenge, strident effect and vulgar contemporaneity, with admirable directness. The exhibition, which ranged over two floors at the Museum of Modern Art (its last stop on a tour that included Madrid, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.) was neither as exciting as his many admirers insist nor as dismal as his detractors would have it. (Of course, it could be argued that when mixed-media or electronic art is anything short of breathtaking, it tends to be pretty glum.) But—and this brings us full circle to Nolde, Kandinsky, Lautrec, and Beckmann as true representatives of their time, men for whom art was intended to be questioning rather than palliative—Nauman probably couldn't care less. He isn't about to give us an inch. The stresses of life as we have made it, the materials that surround us, our fears about the body and loss of control, our constantly thwarted need for order, our technological wonderland gone awry, the inability of traditional art forms to cope with this state of affairs—these are topics that Nauman has been

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pursuing for more than thirty years in sculptural, conceptual, video, photographic, and environmental ways. There was an endurance-test quality to the barrage of neon signs, taxidermy casts on rotating carousels, orders blasted at us through loudspeakers, and dark, narrow rooms we were invited to explore, but anyone who is willing to spend time working his way through the labyrinth of Kandinsky's imagery and staring at Beckmann's victims of rape and dismemberment will, or should, understand the premise.

The Bruce Naumans of the current scene have hardly appeared out of nowhere. They have roots, even American ones, and I don't mean Pop Art or Duchamp. Seventy years ago, Precisionism was America's first indigenous modern art movement. The men (and women) of the twenties looked about at the land of Harding and Coolidge and saw, not an enduring "normalcy" and prosperity, but a transformed landscape, a definitive end to the pastoral. But this observation didn't displease them; children of the new century, they liked the new classical order—the grid, the smokestack, the skyscraper, emblems of the Machine Age—and painted it without a hint of irony or dismay. "Precisionism in America: 1915–1941, Reordering Reality," a magnificent winter survey of this movement at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey, was aptly subtitled. Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, Charles Sheeler, George Ault, Morton Schamberg, et al. were indeed chronicling a reordered reality *and* reordering art-world realities when they insisted that a modern artist had to deal with the world as he found it. Sentimentality be damned. But these taut, Cubist-inspired, seductively painted renderings of subways, factories, bridges, and office towers also raise another question—asked more of the Pop Artists than the Precisionists—about the implicit amorality of an art that raises to the level of an adored object an image of something that is, in air-polluting, dehumanizing fact, a vulgar, inglorious creation. Asked in the 1980s if she would today paint a nuclear reactor, the Precisionist Elsie Driggs (1898–1992) replied in the negative, questioning the ethics of legitimizing something so repugnant to her. Yet Driggs's *Pittsburgh* (1926), which she called "my El Greco," is a dark rhapsody to the blast furnaces of the McLaughlin steel mills. The point here is not that Driggs was a hypocrite, but that she (like the other Precisionists) had her finger on our hypocrisy, our willingness to suspend judgment in the face of sheer wonder at what we have wrought.

On a more conservative note: an exhibition of portraits by the early twentieth-century American painter Robert Henri (grandly entitled "My People") made a three-museum tour of the South this winter and spring, which I caught up with at its Fort Lauderdale stop in February. A chunk of the show dealt with Henri's pictures of children, a major theme in the last decade of his life, and the pleasures here were few and far between. Rarely has so prominent a career suffered an eclipse like Henri's following his death in 1929,

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and looking at these cheery, mawkish, interchangeable kids one can understand why Henri is treated somewhat cavalierly in many art-history texts. But that isn't really fair. A number of substantial pictures in this large show suggested that when Henri stuck to his true milieu—the world of interesting, cosmopolitan adults—he was one of America's ablest painters. The 1917 portrait of Mary Fanton Roberts, owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (which has never been on view there in my twenty-odd years in New York), is a potent example of his undervalued skill. Roberts, an influential art critic and advocate of the new realism in the first decades of the century, was an intelligent, opinionated woman whom Henri respected. The lack of any sentimentality in her portrait, the more convincing sense of anatomy, the forceful but plausible color, the suggestion of a distinctive personality—on various levels, this painting succeeds in a way that the more generic children's portraits do not. *Jesseca Penn in Yellow Satin* (1907), owned by the Mississippi Museum of Art, is as lavish as anything painted by William Merritt Chase, and the renderings of younger colleagues like George Bellows, John Sloan, and William Glackens blend the affection of a mentor with the élan of an astute, energetic observer. With his pince-nez and dark suit, the angular Sloan looks like an urbane intellectual; Glackens, like a prosperous, confident man of the world. Neither artist was quite that at the time these portraits were done (1904), but Henri was clever and talented enough to ponder in paint a hidden self-image that went beyond the simple recording of the outer man. A well-chosen exhibition of work by Sloan and Glackens themselves, also at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, was a satisfying complement to the Henri survey.

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HAROLD FROMM

O, Paglia Mia!

NOT SO MUCH ELEGIAC AS APOSTROPHIC—but a little elegiac too: Oh, Camille Paglia, how long can you keep this up? Even manic Italians are mortal, Dionysian as they may happen to be. Even wellsprings of energy must run dry. Even radical intelligences, when all is said and done, remain (to use a Paglism) "chthonic," sprung from earth's double-crossing clay.

But there are actually a number of Camille Paglias, one of whom sounds like this:

> But this blaming anorexia on the media—this is Naomi [Wolf]'s thing—oh *please*! Anorexia is coming out of these white families, these pushy, perfectionist white families, who all end up with their daughters at Yale. Naomi arrives in England, and "Gee, all the women Rhodes scholars have eating disorders. Gee, it must be . . . *the media*! Maybe it's that *you* are a parent-pleasing, teacher-pleasing little kiss-ass! Maybe you're a *yuppie*! Maybe *you*, Miss Yuppie, have figured out *the system*. Isn't it interesting that Miss Naomi, the one who has succeeded in *the system*, the one who has been given the prizes by the system, she who is the princess of the system, *she's* the one who's bitchin' about it? *I'm* the one who's been poor and rejected—shouldn't *I* be the one bitching about it? *No*—because I'm a scholar, okay, and she's a twit!

Another one sounds like this:

> Everything great in western culture has come from the quarrel with nature. The west and not the east has seen the frightful brutality of natural process, the insult to mind in the heavy blind rolling and milling of matter. In loss of self we would find not love of God but primeval squalor. This revelation has historically fallen upon the western male, who is pulled by tidal rhythms back to the oceanic mother. It is to his resentment of this daemonic undertow that we owe the grand constructions of our culture. Apollonianism, cold and absolute, is the west's sublime refusal. The Apollonian is a male line drawn against the dehumanizing magnitude of female nature.

And yet another, like this:

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> The cutesy treatment of clerical dress as drag, with Tallulah Bankhead cited as an authority, sets a new low for cheap vulgarity and exposes the spiritual emptiness of academe. Even a passing familiarity with anthropology or comparative religion would have helped here. But [Marjorie] Garber's interdisciplinary skills are amateurish: one of her principal sources is Vern Bullough, a contemporary archivist and unreliable popularizer. She treats history like cake batter in a swirling Mixmaster. Romanticism, the birth of modern sexual identity, is never mentioned, even apropos of Byron.

The first specimen, a transcription of a talk at MIT (in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*), represents PopStar Paglia, the testosterone-driven rocker manquée; the second, from *Sexual Personae*, exemplifies Dr. Paglia, the archetypal/psychoanalytic polymath social philosopher; and the third, a review of a book on cross-dressing, introduces Professor Paglia, the imperious no-nonsense scholar, scourge of shoddy scholarship and screwball scholars. PopStar Paglia does not always come off well. There's too much weighty stuff in her head for a pop icon to convey without seeming loopier than pop icons usually do. During a five-minute interview on TV, one can see behind her eyes those tumultuous oceans of thought surging for an expression even *she* can't negotiate in the allotted sound bites. So she seems frustrated, impatient, an explosion of half-inarticulate emotion, a barrage of "Ex*cuse* me!" "OK?" "Absolutely absurd!" "Gimme a break!" "Pull-*eeze*!" And thus the comic-strip effect she produces on innocent viewers: a motormouth (as the Brits call her), a crazy. With Paglia, more is better; she needs lots of expansion time; she has an immensity to say.

This need for *Sprechensraum* was marvelously well-demonstrated on November 15th, 1994 in a performance Paglia gave in mobbed Mandel Hall at the University of Chicago shortly after the publication of her latest book, *Vamps and Tramps*.[1] In anticipation of the booing and riotous behavior that sometimes take place at her appearances, placards were handed out to willing members of the audience as they arrived in the vestibule, inscribed with "RESPECT CAMILLE" and similar injunctions to silence that could be held aloft if the going got rough.

Paglia appeared onstage wearing an outfit evoking Dracula in drag, starting off extremely mannered, very uptight, all her characteristic facial and verbal tics ticking away like mad. She seemed to be anticipating immediate antagonism and was prepared to meet it by

[1] VAMPS AND TRAMPS: New Essays, by *Camille Paglia*. Vintage Books. $15.00p. *Sexual Personae* was originally published in hardbound by Yale University Press and is now a Vintage paperback ($16.00). *Sex, Art, and American Culture* is an original Vintage paperback ($13.00).

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slapping the audience's faces with a whole haberdashery of gloves. Though she told us she was a lesbian and that her favorite people were gay men, she attacked the feminists, she attacked the gays, she attacked the lesbians, she even attacked the English Department of the University of Chicago. But no antagonism was displayed. No RESPECT CAMILLE's were necessary. The audience went wild with cheers and applause in what turned out to be an orgy of love and admiration. The effect on Paglia was pronounced: she became more brilliant by the minute, speaking at a furious pace with never so much as a second's pause over the course of at least two hours. Her OK?'s and all right?'s were spurs to Pegasus. Her knowledge of ancient civilizations, English and European literature, American pop culture—these provided a fecund reservoir of images, metaphors, illustrations, and anecdotes, all milling so close to the surface of her consciousness that she could draw upon them instantly, as the split-second shifts of her wildest improvisations required. No prompts, no notes, no nothing! Dizzying, stunning, it left one gaga.

The PopStar and the Professor were nicely fused at Mandel Hall into an amalgam not often found either in the media or in academia. For all Paglia's passion for pop stars like the revolting Madonna, compared to her writings about them they seem vacuous and boring. Chthonia may be her thing, but there's no real substitute for the brains she has in such abundance. This is not to say that Paglia is without her faults, which her enemies are quick enough to attack. But their backbiting is often little more than the customary guarding of professional turf. Although other scholars are surely entitled to criticize Paglia, their narrow purview often prevents them from acknowledging her powerful accomplishments as a synthesizing public intellectual. There is, after all, a sort of general mediating knowledge more valuable than specialist scholarship, but academics are trained to disparage it. Another tactic is to dismiss *Sexual Personae* on the grounds that Paglia's treatments of major Western figures repeat things heard before or fail to reflect the very latest scholarship. Even granting its extreme repetitiveness, monomania, and need for pruning; its unconvincing overstatements; and its often suffocating projection of mythic meanings onto literature, people, and the universe at large in the now unfashionable manner of psychoanalytic criticism; even granting all of these flaws, cavils of this type minimize the astonishing synthesis, provocative philosophical foundations, polyphonic prose, and piercing intelligence required to bring off such a comprehensive performance.

Paglia's real faults are disappointing or irritating rather than fatally compromising and to some degree they are hard to pry loose from her strengths. In *Vamps and Tramps* as in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, she refers incessantly to *Sexual Personae* as though it were the Parthenon or Stonehenge or some monumental artifact of civilization: "my 700-page scholarly study, *Sexual Personae*"; "*Sexual Personae*

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is a Roman omnibus, a gazetteer of points of cultural transfer"; "The two volumes of *Sexual Personae* [only the first has been published so far], with the author as Amazon epic quester, may be the longest book yet written by a woman." She herself seems awed by it, a Leda slammed by a Swan of Transcendence, whose issue is somehow this remarkable book. Her megalomania is stupendous: "In the four years since I arrived on the scene (after an ill-starred career that included job problems, poverty, and the rejection of *Sexual Personae* by seven major publishers), there has been a dramatic shift in thought in America." Much of her reference to her work has the defensive quality of an autodidact, constantly emphasizing its *scholarliness* as opposed to everyone else's schlock. But given her knowledge and writing skills, one can only wonder why—since her work speaks for itself. (And for all her apparent megalomania, she has a very accurate estimate of her capabilities.) Puzzling too are her rivalries and putdowns, typified by the remark she made to James Wolcott for his article about her in *Vanity Fair* (Sept. 1992): Speaking of Susan Sontag, she exclaimed, "I've been chasing that bitch for twenty-five years, and at last I've passed her."

And yet these ego trips are essential components of Paglia's larger-than-life persona, even a reflection of her unusual honesty and candor, which easily coexist with the manic and hyperbolic style. She says what she feels and believes. (Are there many other gay intellectuals who would publicly assert that AIDS is a legacy of gay promiscuity in the sixties? No one at Mandel Hall booed when she said it.) She lets everything hang out, admits her past mistakes, claims not to take large fees for her lectures, continues to earn a low salary at an obscure university (still grateful for its help when she was jobless), rejects bourgeois decorum and conventional sex roles. Even as a lesbian she's not a lesbian. She tells us over and over how uncertain she finds her sexual identity and how she disbelieves in the newstyle sexual essentialism that enforces its own tyrannies (i.e., you're either gay or straight and you'd damn well better admit it). She likes men, sings paeans to virility, defends patriarchy, tells the gays she admires that their public behavior is nevertheless outrageous (their disruptions of services at St. Patrick's Cathedral, their throwing blood on the altar, their pretense that AIDS is not foremost a gay disease, for her it's all disgusting). To other lesbians, whom she is apt to regard as undersexed and overly "caring," she says, "Why stop at dildoes? If penetration excites, and if receptive female genitalia are so suited to friction by penis-shaped objects, why not go on to real penises?" To her, political loyalties mean very little.

In 1990, with the publication of *Sexual Personae*, Paglia miraculously emerged from twenty years of obscurity into a mythic notoriety. She has transformed her past into the very substance of this myth, whose components have now been repeated so many times that they have come to seem objective facts of nature, like Mount St. Helens: her

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Italian Catholic origins, her rootedness in an extended family, her sexual ambiguity, her fistfight at Bennington (where she was fired as prof), her inability to get jobs or dates (Who wants a pipe bomb as a colleague? Who wants to date Mount St. Helens?); her manic sixties persona, her mentoring by Harold Bloom (her depressive Other), her riotous lectures, her battles with feminists. To think of her as a mere "person" is like thinking of the Mississippi as just a river. Her writing, of course, is suffused with a mythic mentality:

> Italians invented opera. It is our way of living in and reacting to the world. In opera, emotion fills the body. Italians experience emotion in sensory terms, as if it were something eaten, drunk, or poured over the flesh. Long ago on TV, Dick Cavett said he didn't like opera; he didn't "get it." As I looked at his small, thin body and large, smirky, Ivy League head, I said: yes.
>
> (*Sex, Art, and American Culture*)

The point is not that all of this is literally true. The generalizations are too large and sweeping to be "true." Yet it is all true enough. The question to ask is, Is "not literally true" the same as "off the wall"? I don't think so. Paglia's mythic style, like Kierkegaard's or Nietzsche's, is an effective vehicle for a certain type of intellectual work, an emotionally charged transvaluation of values, a melodramatic counterrevolution against political correctness. And beyond intellectual "style" there is her wild and outrageous behavior, heroic for a professor, since she admits to and lives it as part of the whole paraphernalia of her mission—it's not a secret life like Foucault's—thereby revealing how purely conventional is the outrageousness of most "radical" professor types, for whom outré dogmas are requisites, not bars, to professional advancement.

Vamps and Tramps, Paglia's newest collection, is a bargain book by any criteria. Not only does one get more than five hundred pages of the most vital and adroit writing, including material not previously published (not just lintsweepings from her cupboards, as some critics have claimed), but there are TV scripts, photographs, cartoons and comics about Paglia, and a huge annotated bibliography of writings—also about Paglia—that appeared during the two years since her previous collection. All this for a paltry fifteen dollars. Since the annotations are obviously by Paglia herself, they are often pretty hilarious.

In one sense there is nothing really new in this book. Paglia's outlook had already been made perfectly clear on page one of *Sexual Personae*:

> Society is an artificial construction, a defense against nature's power. . . . Civilized man conceals from himself the extent of his subordination to nature. . . . Sexuality and eroticism are the intri-

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> cate intersection of nature and culture. Feminists grossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention: readjust society, eliminate sexual inequality, purify sex roles, and happiness and harmony will reign. . . . For Sade, getting back to nature . . . would be to give free rein to violence and lust. I agree. Society is not the criminal but the force which keeps crime in check. . . . Sex *is* power. Identity is power. In western culture, there are no nonexploitative relationships.

But in another sense the contents of this book are as fresh as ever because of Paglia's unflagging vivacity. The new essay "No Law in the Arena" attacks once more the prevailing truism among feminists and Foucauldians that human beings are socially constructed. Reaffirming that nature runs the show and that women's lives are tied to the ineradicable (and terrifyingly gory) processes of their bodies (whose psychological manifestations are unsuccessfully repressed by the corporate WASP office life many women are taught to pursue), Paglia takes the position most abhorrent to feminists that Appollonian male ratiocination and civilization-building are resistances to nature and to women (the more powerful sex) as secret agents of nature. What feminists call patriarchy is civilization itself, which protects women from raw, predatory nature (like rapists and serial childbearing) by means of laws and technology (e.g.: birth control pills) devised by men. If women have any chance of minimizing the grip of nature it is through male institutions, particularly those of the West. Paglia believes that resistance to nature—particularly through the arts—is humankind's chief mission, however doomed, and that the contemporary failure to acknowledge nature's power over us has led to an arrogant Rousseauist badmouthing of social institutions. This can only entrap women more deeply by treating them once again as fragile Victorian vessels needing protection against the society that is actually sustaining them.

Despite her unbelief, it is always Catholicism that broods over her psyche. Her "conservatism" is not the neoconservatism of politics but the conservatism of Original Sin. Her pet word "chthonic" is a constant reminder that to be of the earth is to be a product of nature, which some Christian churches never liked because nature, corrupted by sin and intertwined with death, is seen as the locus of all our woe. A Christian's goal is to get out of fallen nature, to become as purely spiritual as the flesh will allow. But for Paglia, steeped in the ambivalences of an eroticized, paganized, *Italian* Catholicism, the civilized "self" fights nature not by resisting it (which is virtually impossible, in any case) but by wallowing in it and then transforming it through art and artifice (in the manner of de Sade). For Paglia, it is the "unnatural" drag queen who symbolizes spirit fighting nature's totalitarianism (by giving in to it—but definitely not to the point of procreation—and then transmuting it into camp). The best that the

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rest of us can do, our own more genteel method of giving nature the finger, is to respect society as our strongest defense, while never forgetting that nature will claim us in the end.

Seen in this light, feminists who blame society for what they detest about maleness are dupes of nature, their *real* enemy. So Paglia aims her guns at Gloria Steinem and the National Organization of Women for their "juvenile, jeering attitute toward men and masculinity." She remarks the irony that "the legal and media world inhabited by Steinem and her coterie is filled with bookish white-collar men who are the only ones in society who actually listen to feminist rhetoric and can be guilt-tripped into trying to obey it." Or, as she puts it more succinctly, these are the only male office workers who have been successfully enjoined against saying, "Hey, babe! You got great tits!" ("Sensitivity-training" and the fear of lawsuits, however, may in fact have extended their own insensitive reach further than she is willing to allow.) Though Paglia thinks society should prevent men from engaging in vicious sexual harassment, she does not believe that it should (or really could) androgynize the entire human race. Without testosterone there wouldn't *be* a human race.

In later sections of *Vamps and Tramps*, Paglia goes on to consider pornography, homosexuality, and other explosive subjects with a frankness and insight that have almost disappeared from public discussions caught in the strangle hold of political correctness. In "The Culture Wars," Paglia amplifies these issues through shorter pieces collected from an impressively wide range of periodicals. Her ability to relate both classical and contemporary figures to pop culture is her distinctive signature:

> MacKinnon and Dworkin have become a pop duo, like Mutt and Jeff, Steve and Eydie, Ron and Nancy. MacKinnon, starved and weather-beaten, is a fierce gargoyle of American Gothic. With her witchy tumbleweed hair, she resembles the batty, gritty pioneer woman played by Agnes Moorehead on *The Twilight Zone*. Or she's Nurse Diesel, the preachy secret sadist in Mel Brooks's *High Anxiety*.
>
> Dworkin is Pee-wee Herman's Large Marge, the demon trucker who keeps returning to the scene of her fatal accident. I see MacKinnon and Dworkin making a female buddy picture like *Thelma and Louise*. Their characters: Penny Wise and Pound Foolish, the puritan Gibson Girl and her fuming dybbuk, the glutton for punishment.

These identifications, not as frivolous as they seem, are "objective correlatives," concrete instantiations of Paglia's belief that pop culture artists and artifacts are contemporary versions (personae) of perennial nature-driven types, types she delineated in demonic detail in *Sexual Personae*. In practice this means her intuitions of public utterances and their speakers reinterpret them as archetypes, desta-

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bilizing the "socially constructed" foundations on which their speakers think they are standing.

Not only does Paglia criticize feminists like MacKinnon for their failure to recognize the natural, bodily imperatives that underlie human behavior and belie doctrines of social constructivism, she is engaged almost single-handedly in trying to rescue art from its subservience to feminist politics. "We will never get great art from women if their education exposes them only to the second-rate [i.e., to minor women writers, composers, and artists rescued by the feminist agenda] and if the idea of greatness itself is denied. Greatness is not a white male trick. Every important world civilization has defined its artistic tradition in elitist terms of distinction and excellence." Paglia's conception of art, however, includes not only high culture's elite creations but low culture's mass media, as well as pornography—often intermixed and far from "pure," since they all strive to transmute irreducibly "chthonic" human needs. So it figures that she sees ballet and art museums as soft porn for the educated middle classes and she defends sexy pinups in blue collar lockers as working-class forms of art.

There is too much in this book for a cursory survey to sample. Articles on Princess Di, Madonna, Elizabeth Taylor, Anita Hill, Hillary Clinton, Edward Said, the Bobbitts, D. H. Lawrence, Susan Sontag reveal Paglia's extraordinary ability to make popular culture seem chthonic, complex, and "metaphysical" even to an audience as hostile to it as I am. As a book reviewer she has few peers when it comes to accurately and distinctly conveying a book's contents in clear, animated prose. Of course, her own ideologies can sometimes lead to very questionable conclusions, as when she extols the bizarre world of bodybuilding in a review of Samuel Wilson Fussell's *Muscle*, a book that minutely describes the drug-taking, eight-meals-a-day, 5000-plus calorie diets, and grotesque pumpings-up that characterize the daily lives of professional bodybuilders. For Paglia, their defiance of nature is enough to warrant her approval—though in reality it is ultimately *through* nature that such tortured bodies and demented personalities are produced (but this opens another complex subject). Yet nonplussing as her devotion to drag queens, bodybuilders, and rock stars may be, and joltingly raunchy as her TV scripts and video capers can appear, she comes off as a person of integrity nonetheless, with a mission defined more by Catholic saints than by the professional bottom line.[2] (What was "God" to them is "Nature" to her, and her relation to it is strongly driven by an ambivalent mixture of hatred and love.) Her writing is heavily epigrammatic, hopelessly quotable, recalling Nietzsche's in ironic reductions that expand one's insight.

[2] See Paglia's interesting interview in a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*: *Catholic Lives/Contemporary America*, 93 (Summer 1994): pp. 727–46. "People said to me early on, 'Oh, what can you do? One person can't do anything.' And I said, 'Excuse me, one person can move mountains.' That's the example of the saints."

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Far from being a flake, she represents a rare type of sanity—but one would not necessarily want to live in the same house.

Although he might spin in his grave to hear it, I think that Paglia—manic, hyperbolic, plugged into deafening electronic media (she watches several TV's at loud volume while composing at the computer, unable to write in silence), frequently "talking trash" (to use her expression for street language), violating every convention with impunity as she speaks nonstop the unspeakable—now occupies (perhaps with Henry Louis Gates) the cultural space once inhabited by Lionel Trilling, that oblique, understated, courtly, formal, elitist public intellectual of a past whose ethos seems already remotely distant. Antithetical to Trilling as her sensibility may be, her moral seriousness is as weighty as his (she shares his nature/culture and Freudian stances) and her influence on this generation is bound to be as substantial and far-flung as anything *can* be in an era in which intellectual and moral trends turn over as rapidly as materialist consumer styles. She speaks with a voice that exactly catches the air and aroma of contemporary life, more hectic than Juvenal's, a life in which (for good or for ill) academic decorum like Trilling's has been thrown to the winds, as a corrosive capitalism turns daily life into twitchy MTV videos and democracy's freedoms threaten to undermine democracy itself, reinforcing our subservience to feral nature. In keeping with times like these, her style is indecorous, and her emphasis is more on nature—and nature-in-culture—than Trilling's. She loves the products of "spirit" as much as he but insists more concretely that spirit grows from mud and mud must have its due. The startling accomplishment of her work is its relentless exposure of how much mud underlies spirit, even in the sublimest artworks, which we are likely to experience somewhat differently because of her. But whether any descendants of Trilling can learn to love the hated mud as much as she remains an open question.

Coexisting with her role of public-intellectual-as-stand-up-comedian is her scholar's instinct to conserve what has been of value in Western culture through gestures of "veneration and respect" for spiritual warriors whose victories are nevertheless forms of defeat in a battle that can't be won. Her Italian Catholicism, her defense of literature against politics, her recognition that without men there wouldn't be any women (and vice versa), her capacious aesthetic umbrella for the arts, her respect for plebeian consciousness and primitive needs—these things and more distinguish her from the MLA crowd and contribute to the fame that she richly deserves.[3]

[3] I am indebted to John V. Walker for an interesting twist that I derived from his essay, "Seizing Power: Decadence and Transgression in Foucault and Paglia," in *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sept. 1994), an electronic journal on the Internet. I am also extremely grateful for repeated help from Donald Marshall (University of Illinois at Chicago) and Bill Shuter (Eastern Michigan University).

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Looking Back at Lessing

A LITTLE OVER TWO DECADES AGO when Doris Lessing published her ninth novel, *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973), she could lay claim to consideration as the foremost female writer of fiction then working in English. The women's movement was in full swing and among many of the more literarily inclined Lessing occupied a position of respect second only to Virginia Woolf. And she was contemporary in a way Woolf, thirty and more years dead, couldn't be. *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which met with some puzzlement when first published, had become increasingly cited and talked about (if not always read through) by those aspiring toward being what, in the core section of the book, Lessing titled "Free Women." She had also completed the five-volume series, *Children of Violence* (more familiarly the "Martha Quest" novels) in which a woman who shared much of Lessing's biography was tracked, in her quest, from her days as a young woman in Southern Rhodesia, through marriages, pregnancies, divorces, to her eventual death in London. By 1973, Lessing had also published—in addition to many volumes of short fiction—a novel (her first) of Africa, *The Grass is Singing*; two autobiographical prose works; and *Briefing for a Descent to Hell*, a dark, dystopian vision of the future. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, a woman approaching middle age, married and with children, embarks on an affair with a man significantly younger than herself. The novel was given a front-page review by Elizabeth Hardwick in the *New York Times Book Review*, and in the course of her interesting account of it Hardwick identified the "rather flat, puzzling, aching anguish" that she found characteristic of Lessing's fiction, including her latest. "Enormous sadness and depression," was the particular tone Hardwick heard, and she thought it not wholly to the advantage of *The Summer Before the Dark* as a novel.

At present, Lessing's work is a good deal further away from the central concerns of most serious readers of fiction. Nothing in the writing she has published in the last two decades comes even close to challenging these readers, whether female or male, the way *The Golden Notebook* and the Martha Quest novels—especially the concluding, most disturbing one, *The Four-Gated City*—challenged them. She has become a respected and respectable figure to be surveyed in accounts of post-Second War novelists, viewed dispassionately along with Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble. So it is a good time for her to weigh in with this enlivening and substantial first volume of

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autobiography, taking her from childhood up to her move from Africa to London in 1949.[1] Lessing says early in the book that she admires certain people who have chosen to keep their mouths shut; but with rumors of five American biographers at work in one way or another on her life, the motive of self-defense came to the fore. Few people are left who can be hurt by what she has to say, at least in writing about her first thirty years. She can tell the truth, as she sees it, "without snags and blocks of conscience." Thus she prepares us for the leisurely, extremely detailed narrative that unfolds in the effort to tell us exactly what it is she's "got" under her skin.

The easiest answer, and the one Lessing more than hints at in the book, is her mother, Emily Maude McVeagh, a nurse who cared for Lessing's father, Alfred Taylor, in London's Royal Free Hospital where he was suffering from shell shock, depression, and an amputated leg. After the First World War the Taylors went out to Kermanshah, in Persia, where Alfred worked in the Imperial Bank and where Doris and her brother were born; later, after a sojourn in England, the family settled on a farm in Southern Rhodesia, the country in which Lessing spent her young life. She tells us that she now sees her mother as a "tragic figure, living out her disappointing years with courage and with dignity," but there's not much of this sympathetic figure in the book. Rather we're given the woman who, conforming to procedures back then, refused to feed the infant Doris when she cried; the woman who toilet trained her, who was "a vibrating column of efficiency and ruthless energy," who while Doris leaned against her father's knee (the real one, not the metal-and-wood replacement) went on and on to some visitor about how her children were sapping her strength, how her talents were withering, "how the little girl in particular (she was so difficult, so naughty!) made her life a total misery." When the family traveled home to England from Persia in 1924, Lessing's mother decided they should go via Moscow so as not to expose the children to the heat of the Red Sea. The horrendous journey that ensued, across the Caspian Sea in an oil tanker full of lice, then on a foodless train to Moscow where they subsisted on hard-boiled eggs and bread, bought by the mother at stations from peasant women (with typhoid and typhus everywhere, swarms of beggars and homeless children)—all this formed the substance of stories her mother would tell in future years. Lessing says she doesn't remember these events, nor does she remember how, at the Russian frontier, her mother browbeat a Russian official to let them in even though their passports were imperfectly stamped. Since Doris was only five at the time, one can't blame her for remembering things other than what her mother emphasized afterwards. But the "nervous flight" from her mother Lessing says she was engaged in as

[1] UNDER MY SKIN, by *Doris Lessing*. HarperCollins. $25.00.

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far back as she could remember, may have been in play here; at any rate by age fourteen she was "obdurately against" everything that Emily Taylor represented.

This "state of accusation" Lessing identifies is painful to read about, since next to blaming the father, blaming the mother is always something a daughter can indulge in. Of course Lessing doesn't want to indulge herself—she's too severely moral for that—and at certain moments in the book she speaks of herself as marked out for trouble in a way more powerful than can be blamed on her luckless mother or father. For example, later on when she decides to abandon not only her first husband, Frank Wisdom, but also the two children she bore him, it is a delicate moment for the autobiographer to handle. Lessing rationalizes a bit, saying the children would be looked after by loving people who would do the job more efficiently than she. She knew this, not because she hadn't up to that point performed the task just like the other women she saw around her, "but because of this secret doom that was inside me—and which had brought my parents to their pitiful condition." Near the end of the book she speaks of still not understanding, when she settled in London, the fact that she had been "conditioned for tears." These phrases seem to me attempts at naming what is finally beyond understanding, and what no talk about one's father or mother will explain: namely, the demon that drove this intensely gifted, perennially dissatisfied—sometimes to the point of despair and breakdown—young and older woman. "I've got you under my skin / I've got you deep in the heart of me": Cole Porter's lines furnish the book's title and act as one of its epigraphs. But we're asked to ignore the jaunty tone of the song and perhaps not to think of its concluding advice: "Use your mentality, / Wake up to reality," the sort of advice you give only when you've determined that you "never can win"—advice Lessing has never been about to take to heart.[2]

It must be said that the young, extremely attractive girl featured in the excellent photographs in this book, seems unaware that her "secret doom" has already conditioned her to tears. Aware of this odd disparity, Lessing names this healthy resilient animal—proud of her body, able to make others laugh—"Tigger," and the nickname survived through two marriages. (When she became a Communist she was called "Comrade Tigger.") It's Tigger who has pillow-fights with her mother or undergoes her father's tickling so as to play the game.

[2] For someone who makes as much, in the autobiography, of popular lyrics, Lessing time and again gets their words wrong. She does okay with Porter's "Under My Skin," but messes up "Night and Day" ("Night and day / I think of you"). "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie" doesn't begin "I love you, yes I do, I love you," and "Swinging on a Star" doesn't say "Do you want to be better off than you are / Carry moonbeams home in a jar . . ." Yeats's little poem "The Scholars" does not end "O God, what would they say, if their Catullus came their way." This probably doesn't matter but if she likes them enough to quote them, why not get the words right?

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It's Tigger, the "healthy bouncing beast," who manages to survive the four years in a convent school to which she was sent. It's Tigger who marries Frank Wisdom, a young civil servant, who drinks and dances with the other young marrieds, has children without disaster, says at one point that she could have made a good veterinarian, or a doctor, or a matron, or a farmer. The vitality of Lessing's prose, especially in the first half of the book, testifies to Tigger's claim. What a wonderful place to grow up, her writing convinces us, as she and her brother sit under the telephone lines stretching from the Mandor Mine across a grass field to the Taylors' farm:

> Our ears to the metal pole we listened to the thrumming, drumming, deep-singing of the wind in the wires where we watched, as we listened, the birds, hundreds of birds, alighting, balancing, taking off again, big birds and little birds and plain birds and birds coloured like rainbows or sunsets, the most glamorous of them, the rollers, mauve and grey and pink, like large kingfishers.

As with *The Grass is Singing*, this writing has some of the delicate sensuous life of early D.H. Lawrence. Speaking at one point of the "intense physicality" of Lawrence's prose, she admits that he "must have influenced me." No doubt about it: a memorable Lawrentian passage describes her looking after a brood of hatching chicks when her mother has taken her father to the hospital in Salisbury. As Doris sits up in a cold room and watches the eggs, there appears in one of them a "little rough place" that meant birth was imminent:

> I held the egg to my ear, and heard the tap tap tap of the hidden chick, and wept with excitement and relief. Out flopped that hideous chick, dried at once into adorableness, out flopped another . . . soon all over the cracking eggs lay and sprawled the wet monstrous creatures, and between the eggs trembled the pretty dried-out chicks. I ran out, found the oldest and most experienced hen, and put her into a pen where the nest box was already lined with straw and feathers, and when I brought out a couple of dozen little chicks and put them one by one into the nest she seemed not to know her own mind. Then, her brain switched gear, she clucked, and delicately trod her way among them and became their mother.

This is beyond praise, an example of moments when her writing gets under the alert reader's skin.

In fact I found myself appreciating and admiring passages where the grim spirit in the heart of Lessing isn't wholly allowed to upstage superficial Tigger. Something like an older version of the latter can be heard when, from time to time in the book, Lessing addresses contemporary women out of the wisdom of age seventy-five. Gynecologically speaking she compares herself to the fabled peasant

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woman who never had anything wrong with her—no "pre-menstrual tension," three normal births, easy periods which ended in her early forties, no unpleasant menopause. So she wants to hold out some hope for young women who are prepared only for "womb troubles":

> When I—my generation—looked forward to our lives as females, we were not full of fear and foreboding. We felt confident, we felt in control. We were not bombarded with bleak information from television, radio, newspapers, women's magazines. If girls were told, from very young, that they can expect bad times of every sort from pre-menstrual tension to menopausal miseries, is it not possible they are attracting bad times?

"I became a Communist because of the spirit of the times, because of the *Zeitgeist*"—so Lessing explains her being recruited into the dissident "progressive" band of believers she discovered in Rhodesia. Typically, she makes her decision an accession to the inevitable, rather than a moral action (she writes in a similar vein about abandoning her husband and children). Whether or not one is convinced by such rationalizations, the latter stages of this autobiography, filled with the names of a great many people we have never heard of and are given no reason to have interest in, are rather heavy going. Never one to have second thoughts about a paragraph or a page she's written, Lessing exercises little stylistic shaping of her outpouring of anecdote, character, and situation. Her hope may be that it's enough merely for her to recount them, but this seems to me very much not the case. Certainly she's right to give as a reason for writing the book the fact that she was part of "an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa." It may take a more than ordinary care with sentences and paragraphs to make that time come strongly alive to us.

Critical accounts of Lessing's contribution and stature as a writer of fiction mainly bypass her style by acting as if she didn't have one, or at least that it is of not much account, since the substance of what she says is so important. I do not think she would be pleased by this form of condescension, and there is no reason to avoid the question of what difference style makes in her work, since *The Grass is Singing* and the early "African" stories are written in a direct, unadorned, intelligently observant prose to be admired. D.H. Lawrence's presence is felt, but in a less fevered and rhetorical way. It's with the Martha Quest novels that questions of style and compositional procedure arise. The first four novels of *Children of Violence*, three of which were published before *The Golden Notebook*, are written in the leisurely, extremely conventional novelese Lessing inherited from her realist predecessors; the narrative terms are basically those within which Arnold Bennett, say, worked in *The Old Wives' Tale* and the Clayhanger trilogy. It is expected that we will care about the "story" of this young

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woman as she deals with her parents and her marriages, and though it's easy enough to caution that Martha Quest is not Doris Lessing, I would guess nobody reads these books without having some interest in Lessing's biography and how it felt to be acting out one's life in the late days of the British Empire in Africa. Yet readers with an appetite for interesting happenings in fiction may be slightly disappointed as they move through the many pages of these novels. Reviewing the second of them, the ironically titled *A Proper Marriage*, Kingsley Amis—whom one wouldn't suspect of being a devoted reader of Lessing—praised various excellent things in it and confided that "Mrs. Lessing is a whole network of streets ahead of the 'average' novelist." But in trying to summarize the story he apologized for implying that almost nothing happens, "especially when, as here, almost nothing happens." Amis doesn't point out what seems to me the case, that these novels also lack a density of psychological speculation that might fill in for the absence of "action." Lessing pretty much stays inside her heroine—unlike, say, the George Eliot of *Middlemarch*—and takes on a neutral tone of presentation that can, cumulatively, provoke exasperation.[3]

As for *The Golden Notebook* the consensus seems to be that after writing the first three Martha Quest novels, Lessing felt dissatisfied with her conventional narrative and proceeded to deconstruct, interrogate and elaborately play around with the novel form. Ten years after *Notebook* was published she wrote a rather tendentious preface to a revised edition, claiming that most of the criticism the novel received on its appearance has been "too silly to be true." Perhaps so (I haven't made a comparative study), but Irving Howe's review of it in *The New Republic* was anything but silly. He called it "a work of high seriousness," "the most absorbing and exciting piece of new fiction I have read in a decade." Howe, back there thirty-four years ago, was bowled over by the fact that the center of the novel's action was concerned with Anna Wulf, "a mature intellectual woman." This, Howe said, was a rarity in modern fiction, as was Lessing's ability to insist upon connections between the mind of her heroine and the larger social and political events of the 1950s. But there were of course other attractions of the book, especially to those women who made and still make up the bulk of its readership (900,000 hardcover copies sold). Here was a book in which a man is described as looking at every woman by "imagining her as she would be when he had fucked her into insensibility." A novel in which a character goes to bat for the vaginal ("real") as opposed to the clitoral orgasm and in which the "free women," Molly and Anna, ruthlessly satirize Molly's ex-husband, the successful businessman Richard. All strong stuff for

[3] As it evidently did in a reader who scrawled in the margin of our library's copy of *A Proper Marriage*, apropos of Martha Quest's troubles, "Bitch, bitch, bitch. Why doesn't she *do* something? I don't feel sorry for her."

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1962, though it seems doubtful whether the book can now be read by either sex with the fresh excitement it once provoked. At any rate, it's canonized, the subject of many articles, dissertations, published books, and is certainly the most highly structured of Lessing's books, probably for better rather than worse.

But as the sixties wore on and the world in general became (even) more violent, fragmented and unhappy, so did Lessing's fiction. Her engagement with the irrational, with drugs, with the Sufi mystics and the unsavory psychology of R.D. Laing, made the monstrously overlong novel that concludes *Children of Violence (The Four-Gated City*, 1969) a book that at least for this reader provided no pleasure, to put it mildly. And things did not improve with the toneless solemn inner journeys in *Briefing for a Descent to Hell* (1971) and *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974). Even the more available, previously mentioned, *Summer Before the Dark*, turns at its end into a tale of woe, unrelieved by any humor or irony. As for *Canopus in Argos*, the four-volume science-fiction series that followed (1979–82), there must be those who read it with some interest, though no one I know of did.

After this prolonged stretch of disenchantment with the novel as "bright book of life" (D.H. Lawrence), Lessing published, under the name of Jane Somers, two novels about a woman writer: written in diary form, easy to read, unencumbered by much "thought," they were published pseudonymously, so Lessing said afterwards, to see whether the public that would buy books signed Doris Lessing would do the same for Jane Somers. (They sold only modestly, and were later republished under Lessing's name.) What exactly this little experiment demonstrated I don't really see. Maybe the public and the critics were right not to rave about these books, even though they were "really" authentic products. Maybe the real test would have been, as Jonathan Yardley astutely suggested, for Lessing to have kept on publishing novels under the pseudonym—that would have been a bold experiment. But she didn't, and followed them instead in 1985 with *The Good Terrorist*, about a group of young people in a London "squat," whose animating figure is Alice, the "good" girl of the title. Reviewing it, Alison Lurie unfathomably called it the most interesting political novel since Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. In fact *The Good Terrorist* (unlike Conrad) is shapeless, to the extent of having no chapter breaks in its nearly 400 pages. In *Under My Skin* Lessing refers to her monomaniacal heroine as "quite mad," but evidently still thought it worthwhile to trace her and her dismal companions' fortunes in a detached voice of narrative reportage. Finally, more or less winding up the eighties, appeared *The Fifth Child*, a short and shocking account of what happens to a family when a mother's fifth child turns out to be a "wild" child, more incorrigible animal than human.

I would trade the last twenty years' worth of Lessing's novels for the stories and sketches she published three years ago—in an appropri-

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ately named book—*The Real Thing*. The focus here is no more nor less than London, from its restaurants, to Regent's Park and Hampstead Heath, to (in an especially attractive sketch) the London Underground as observed by the author riding on the Jubilee Line:

> Charing Cross and everyone gets out. At the exit machine a girl appears running up from the deeper levels, and she is chirping like a fire alarm. Now she has drawn our attention to it, in fact a steady bleeping is going on, and for all we know, it is a fire alarm. These days there are so many electronic bleeps, cheeps, buzzes, blurps, that we don't hear them. The girl is a fey creature, blonde locks flying around a flushed face. She is laughing dizzily, and racing a flight or flock of young things coming into the West End for an evening's adventure, all of them already crazed with pleasure, and in another dimension of speed and lightness, like sparks speeding up and out.

Who knows, maybe one of these girls was nicknamed Tigger. At any rate Lessing's prose here has the kind of relaxed power and delicacy, making it all look easy and casual, that is evident in many of the pages of *Under My Skin* and that has been so absent from the anguished, hard-driving, monumentally solemn world of her longer fictions. Cole Porter would not have wanted to live there, but he might have found a spot just under the skin of a writer discovering new things about herself and the world as she moves through her eighth decade.

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ALAN DAVIS

The Purest Wilderness: Feasting and Fasting in Fiction

I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT LITERARY FICTION is the purest kind of wilderness in a world saturated with information and technology but starved for story. Where else these days can we find, and lose ourselves in, a world peopled with the complexities of felt experience, a narrative informed by an empathic (as opposed to voyeuristic) vision, a syntax which is both muscular and more or less coherent? Whether a novelist is feasting or fasting (terms preferable to *minimalist* and *maximalist*, with their pseudo-scientific pretensions), the measure of the book is whether formulaic gestures are almost always scanted in favor of the qualities listed above—complexity, empathy, a muscular syntax, a coherent vision. As the critic Sven Birkerts wrote recently in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Faber and Faber, 1994), "Simple linguistic prefab is now the norm, while ambiguity, paradox, irony, subtlety and wit are fast disappearing."

Sitting here with my laptop, I am certainly more sympathetic to pop culture and the electronic/computer age than Birkerts on his IBM Selectric, but most of us do in fact live in a profane world of speed and distraction which has little patience for the ritual of reading serious fiction. If the poet Quincy Troupe, growing up in East St. Louis, once carried books in his back pocket with his shirt untucked to hide them because otherwise somebody might call him a sissy and force him to fight, many of us in more polite society are often called upon to defend, it seems, not only literature but all of literary culture from those who claim that literature encourages habits of thought which are not capitalistic and are seldom pragmatic. For example, an acquaintance said to me recently, "You know, I'm all for literature and that kind of stuff, I guess, but what exactly is it good for?"

Instead of replying contentiously, as I once might have, "Nothing. And what's wrong with *that*?", nowadays I simply say that literature is where wilderness resides, and without wilderness we are lost. The statement is a rhetorical trick, of course, because what could be more opposed to wilderness than an object forged in the imagination and made word by word, sentence by sentence? But hear me out. By virtue of its loyalty to its own forms, the fictive imagination is, or should be, in opposition to the culture and society which surround it, providing a place with its own scents and sounds, an alternative reality like a

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stand of pine or a cypress swamp, and threatening any collective narrative or bureaucratic consensus. By virtue of its grounding in the workaday world, it creates an aesthetic experience from which we emerge chastened and refreshed, as though from a hike on the Appalachian Trail.

Writers feast or fast on what's out there, identifying flora and fauna with abandon or fastidiously choosing objects and events to witness and sculpt in language. Some, like Joseph Heller in *Closing Time*, the Rabelaisian sequel to *Catch-22*, gorge themselves on their part of the world.[1] I suppose such a sequel was inevitable, given the times and the downward arc of Heller's career after that first novel, published in 1961. He followed the book that made him famous with *Something Happened*, his Woody Allen syndrome novel—a narrative so deliberately unfunny that it was hard to take. *Catch-22*'s phenomenal success, of course, is a curse that any of us would be more than willing to bear up under, but it has made Heller's subsequent work almost incidental and always disappointing because, whatever their virtues or delights, they were not *Catch-22*, a zany tour de force with a great deal of vaudeville, some Swiftian satire and moments of heartrending pathos. The book, along with the title which became a part of our vocabulary, seemed exactly to capture the tone of an absurd era.

Closing Time, a book which uses Coney Island and its carnival delights, displaced underground, as a structural device and an organizing metaphor, is itself an amusement park of fiction, one which at times suffers from garrulousness or silliness but which can also be truly moving in its paean to a dying generation. The book's overall tone, despite the reams of slapstick, is elegiac from the first sentence: "When people our age speak of the war it is not of Vietnam but of the one that broke out more than half a century ago and swept in almost all the world." Sammy Singer, the gunner in *Catch-22*, has lost his wife to cancer and his job to corporate downsizing; Lew Rabinowitz, whose long nostalgic monologues are touching, has been battling Hodgkin's disease for decades. Singer and Rabinowiitz, among others, are facing as valiantly as possible the ravages of time; their stories provide ballast and pathos in *Closing Time*, serving much the same function here as Snowden's death and its memory did in Heller's first book.

By now, Heller can do his routines with his eyes closed, on automatic pilot, and too much of the book consists of what feels like easy and dated Cold War satire or of absurdity piled upon absurdity. The Chaplain has been abducted by the American government, for example, because he is pissing radioactive heavy water, and Milo Minderbinder, entrepreneur extraordinaire, decides to buy shares in the Chaplain and make him into a going concern. Minderbinder is

[1] CLOSING TIME, by *Joseph Heller*. Simon & Schuster. $24.00.

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also trying to sell a new stealth bomber to the government, "to any government, of course, that could afford to buy," one which, to salve Yossarian's conscience, he guarantees won't work. Deep under New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal is a Dantesque underground city, prepared for the nuclear apocalypse, and a ghostly version of Coney Island run by Mr. George C. Tilyou, "who'd been dead almost eighty years." While such zaniness is almost always amusing at first, and sometimes pointed, Heller seldom knows when to stop.

Even so, there is of course Yossarian, up to his neck in all of these misadventures, an Everyman determined to right all wrongs even as he creates more of them. He is one of American Literature's great vibrant characters, not quite Falstaffian perhaps, but of Falstaff's kingdom—the life force who refuses to reconcile with his mortality. He still plans to live forever or to die trying, and we first meet him in the hospital because, although perfectly healthy, "He had no doubt he had lots to worry about. His parents were dead, and so were all his uncles and aunts." His life, full of ex-wives and children and new pursuits, is as topsy-turvy as you might have guessed, so he is the perfect vehicle to lead us through the thickets of bleakness and absurdity to the book's conclusion, a nuclear nightmare brought on by the President, a video game idiot, when he presses his red buttons. Yossarian, of course, decides against hunkering down underground and emerges into the descending nuclear night. He embodies the paranoid hypochondria of our age—"If I don't have it, I soon will"—but he is also the only character who gives Heller a chance to tie together the various strands of this ambitious, exuberant book, which is part Mark Twain, willing to turn anything into farce, part Thomas Pynchon, plotting out the myriad ways in which conspiracies dog and threaten the daylight world, and part Dante, attempting to triangulate the location of the Inferno.

If Heller, like a borscht belt comic, feasts on his world until we are filled to bursting with it, others witness more selectively to their epoch of political and social upheaval. In her latest novel, Nadine Gordimer chronicles almost journalistically the traumatic transitional period leading to the end of apartheid.[2] It is a novel which captures brilliantly the mythic process of building a new order, with its disappointments, betrayals, compromises and small advances, and of reentering a society after the revolution. "So what is normality?" she writes. "Isn't it just the way people manage to live under any particular circumstance?"

Gordimer, born in 1923 and awarded the Nobel Prize in 1991, is a writer hard to match for sheer historical sweep, and this latest novel, which manages to have it both ways, to feast on sensual detail and to fast by subordinating those details to a rigorous schematic, mostly

[2] NONE TO ACCOMPANY ME, by *Nadine Gordimer*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $22.00.

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follows the fortunes of two couples, one white and one black, whose fates are representative of the times. Vera Stark (notice the name, which fits) is a white lawyer with the Legal Foundation, whose business it is to relocate black communities on land which was originally stolen from them. Her second husband Bennet loves her uncritically and is dependent upon her, a state she resents, for she is efficient but threatened by emotional intimacy. She does not want to be loved by someone who cannot imagine living without her. In fact, she is not certain if her son, now a banker in England going through a divorce, is Bennet's or her first husband's, and her daughter, rejecting heterosexuality, has taken a female lover. Vera's black friends Didymus and Sibongile Maqoma have returned to South Africa after years of exile as members of the underground; for Didymus, once a leader, "his greatest service was for him to be forgotten," reduced in stature and eventually faced with trumped-up revisionist charges, while Sibongile, flamboyant and charismatic, is a rising star in the new order. Their daughter Mpho knows little of her parents' native land after a life of exile and must try to reconcile the past, represented by a grandmother, with the future, represented by an undesired pregnancy Sibongile forces Mpho to abort.

Gordimer leads us programmatically through the lives of these people; the novel often reads like a dissertation, though one full of sensual imagery. Didymus becomes a fall guy while his wife, her political correctness certified by a death threat, travels about the world raising funds. Tainted by an historical moment "when integrity in many matters could be maintained only by dishonesty, when truth had to survive by lies," Vera muddles along until the historical sweep of change forces personal as well as cultural dislocations. Inquiring into other people's lives, tending to "the extended family of the Foundation," Vera neglects her own mental health, but finally the flood of returning exiles forces her to re-examine the quicksand of lies upon which her domestic life has been built. She gets to know her grandson (sent from London to stay with her) and comes to see that her house, the one which belonged to her first husband, is both literally and metaphorically empty in a world where, according to one of her associates, "there's no millennium: only the IMF and the World Bank." She sells her house, leaves her husband and tells her daughter, who has adopted a child, that there's only one thing she wants: "To find out about my life. The truth. In the end. That's all."

The personal is political, the political personal for Gordimer, whose vision allows for a bittersweet new beginning in the face of history: "Perhaps the passing away of the old regime makes the abandonment of an old personal life also possible." Tim O'Brien is not so lucky; in his latest novel, he is still a hunger artist, struggling with the aftermath

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of Vietnam.[3] Like Raymond Carver, he does not feast upon the past but makes it anew into the astringent forms of high art, nor does he witness it like Gordimer from a committed but aesthetic distance; instead, he excludes everything which does not apply to get at "the truth," but the truth of a human life is too slippery to grasp, so O'Brien fastidiously alchemizes the shifting shapes of the workaday past. The book becomes a kind of epistemological thriller. In it, the My Lai massacre is the backdrop to a story about John Wade, a politician whose run for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota collapses in a traumatic defeat when a newspaper article places him at the site of the famous Vietnam massacre. He and his wife Kathy retreat to a secluded lakeside cabin near the Canadian Boundary Waters and a day or so later his wife disappears, along with a boat, under mysterious circumstances.

Anyone who read "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien's article this fall in the *New York Times Magazine* (October 2, 1994) about his recent return to Vietnam for the first time since his tour of duty and his subsequent depression which brought him close to suicide knows that fasting is not necessarily uplifting. In the novel, O'Brien is somehow confessing his own complicity, and our national complicity, in such atrocities as My Lai, because he was there in Vietnam and lived through it. He makes art out of survivor's guilt, and his technique naturally enough brings the Dos Passos of the *U.S.A.* trilogy to mind. Mostly a book about John Wade, the novel crosscuts the narrative with chapter-length hypotheses about Kathy's fate, chapters of "evidence" which contain character testimony, political intrigue, and voluminous quotations with footnotes, some of the quotations detailing testimony concerning My Lai or post-traumatic shock syndrome and many of the footnotes elaborating upon a citation in O'Brien's own voice: "What drives me on, I realize, is a craving to force entry into another heart, to trick the tumblers of natural law, to perform miracles of knowing. It's human nature. We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others."

But Wade, once a magician known in Vietnam as Sorcerer ("He performed the necessary tricks, dreamed the necessary dreams") and now a politician and possibly a murderer, has "lost touch with some defining part of himself" and is a cold fish, unknowable and largely unsympathetic. O'Brien wisely softens this chilling portrait of a man who may be evil, banal, or just numb with an unrealized grief by inserting chapters of hypothesis. Each suggests a different way in which his wife may have met her end, but none are grisly. Quite the contrary: they're the loveliest things in the book, juxtaposing to the horrors of politics and My Lai the possibility that Kathy perished because she got lost in the Boundary Waters, in a beautiful land of

[3] IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS, by *Tim O'Brien*. Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. $21.95.

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"the purest wilderness, everything tangled up with everything else," a wilderness which "thickened and deepened and became complete." Maybe she drowned, or maybe she's still alive, maybe it's all a plot between husband and wife to escape from the glare of notoriety. The hypotheses are Kathy's imaginative crescendos to match her husband's My Lai nightmares, and the novel, whose voice manages to be both hard-boiled and tender, concludes on that cohesive note of ambiguity, first in a footnote ("Mystery finally claims us. Who are we? Where do we go? . . . There is no tidiness. Blame it on the human heart.") and then in the final chapter which, appropriately, is yet another hypothesis: perhaps the Wades arranged everything beforehand—"Are we so cynical, so sophisticated as to write off even the chance of happy endings? . . . Can we believe that he was not a monster but a man? That he was innocent of everything except his life?"

The book is an epistemological adventure. Despite occasional unwieldiness, O'Brien pulls it off, and his purpose perhaps is not incidental to my own here. The idea of witness which pervades a book like this one (and like Gordimer's) hardly allows the reader (or the writer, for that matter) to feast at the banquet of life in joy and delight. Unlike Heller, who gives us a dozen laughs for every intimation of mortality and seems to be having one hell of a good time even when lamenting the years, O'Brien is not necessarily having a good time himself and he is certainly not writing an entertainment. He wants to be, above all, interesting, the goal of every novelist since James who aspires to the priesthood of fiction. O'Brien is after something, picking over the evidence, sweating out his art sentence by sentence, and I admire him for it, just as I admire the clarity of Ray Carver's singular vision and Gordimer's more prolific elegance, the high art of her method.

But I began with Heller's feasting and I will end with another feast of sorts, Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies.[4] Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in 1988; this book was originally published in Arabic in 1982 and is set in a medieval Islamic city. As the title implies, Mahfouz retells the *Arabian Nights* with gusto and flair, and the world he creates, full of deception and greed and misery as well as ambition and sacrilege and murder, will be all too familiar to most readers. Anyone intimate with the recent history of Haiti, for instance, with its Duvalierists, its Tontons Macoutes, and its "de-factos," will feel right at home in this Islamic mesh of corruption, KGB-like repression, otherworldly mysticism, and hopefulness.

It begins when Shahrzad, her stories completed, her reprieve announced by the sultan, tells her father that "I sacrificed myself in

[4] ARABIAN NIGHTS AND DAYS, by *Naguib Mahfouz*. Trans. by *Denys Johnson-Davies*. Doubleday. $22.95.

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order to stem the torrent of blood." The sultan is a murderer, she says, and "a crime is a crime. How many virgins has he killed! How many pious and God-fearing people has he wiped out! Only hypocrites are left in the kingdom." Mahfouz then leads us into a labyrinth of atrocities and schemes run amok, most often arranged by genies let out of bottles. (Once out, of course, they can never be put back; Mahfouz's world too closely parallels the world around us for it to be otherwise.) I thoroughly enjoyed the bloodbath and the intrigues; it was as though I were back home in Louisiana (which someone once called the Westernmost Arab state), following local politics.

In Western terms, the novel is almost unclassifiable. It is a mixture of myth and magical realism, of fable and social commentary, of literary allusion and gritty workaday detail, as though Salman Rushdie and I.B. Singer had collaborated. Its psychological acuity is also penetrating, especially concerning states of possession and of homicidal or erotic fixation. Characters try to resist the voices of madcap genies, who are in some cases genial like guardian angels but are mostly capricious like Greek deities. One character, Sanaan, for example, rapes and murders an elementary school girl under the influence of his genie, and then, "with a superhuman effort . . . took control of himself. . . . He was another person; the killer-violator was another person." The genie wants the governor killed, however, and soon enough Sanaan obliges, whereupon the genie abandons him to his fate, execution. Another murderer, however, also to be executed, is even so saved by *his* genie, who provides a simulacrum for the execution and transforms the murderer into "a slim Ethiopian with crimpy hair and a light beard." Obsessions, holy wars, personal vengeance—the power of suggestion is king, and all the while the sultan, himself victimized at one point by unquenchable lust into making an idiot of himself, wanders about his city disguised as a merchant, learning about his subjects and developing an embryonic conscience. He is determined to hear everyone's story, which is where we came in, starved for plot, for meaning and for wilderness.

Personally, I think the idea of genies roaming about the world, causing most of our problems because we are weak vessels of the divine, too suggestible for our own good, makes about as much sense as any other theory I've heard lately. Its explanatory value certainly outclasses that claimed by literary theory. While theorists reduce fiction by overlaying it with their ideological grids, the rest of us feast and fast on literature, for the genies (i.e., geniuses, tutelary spirits) are everywhere, or at least in enough places for us to find them out. Reading in this way lessens my loneliness, paradoxically, by taking me from the world of everydayness (where it snows and snows and snows, where my father's veins harden and my mother's seizures refuse to respond to medication, where the bombardment of Chechnya or the earthquake ruins of Kobe greet me over coffee) and depositing me in a new invented place which the fiction stubbornly inhabits. It is a

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cliché, of course, for theorists to claim that fiction cannot escape from its origins or its culture. In an age of self-conscious sophistication and ontological reductionism, who would dare to claim otherwise? Even so, every good novel I encounter convinces me that D.H. Lawrence in his passionate vitalism was right when he said to trust not the author but the novel, that bright shining book of life. A book which holds steady to its invented truth and its aesthetic scruples is still somewhere to go, a wild place which is not the place where most of us usually reside.

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DAVID DOOLEY

Bloom and the Canon

CONSIDER THE TWO FOLLOWING kinds of critical writing:

> 1) I must admit that each time I reread [*Bleak House*], I tend to cry whenever Esther Summerson cries. . . .
> 2) [T]here are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts.

The first quotation may seem naive or at least old-fashioned, not only pre-Derrida but pre-New Criticism. The second kind of writing is immediately recognizable as a specimen of academic deconstruction or literary "theory"; the source is the first page of Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading* (1975). Surprisingly, the first quotation is later, not earlier, than the second; it comes from Harold Bloom's new book, *The Western Canon.*[1] Part of the interest of *The Western Canon* lies in measuring the distance Bloom has traveled from books like *A Map of Misreading* and *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973).

One cannot understand Bloom's criticism, especially *The Anxiety of Influence*, without imagining the situation of a very bright, very well-read young graduate student and teacher at Yale in the 1950s. No other university was then so closely identified with the New Criticism, which had by then securely established close reading of the self-contained art object as method and the Modernist and Metaphysical canons as preferred subject. Most of the prominent New Critics were at least sympathetic to high church Christianity. Bloom was Jewish, and, he mentions in the new book, the son of a garment worker. Eliot and Pound, gods for most of the New Critics, had on occasion written anti-Semitic poems. Is it any wonder that Bloom sought to overturn most of the pieties of his elders, or that a key concept in his work has always been "belatedness"?

Yet another well-known critic must be mentioned in any discussion of Bloom's work: F. R. Leavis, perhaps the most prominent English-language critic during the fifties and sixties. Although Leavis was no Tory in either politics or religion, like the American New Critics he advocated the Metaphysical poets at the expense of Milton and the Modernists at the expense of the Romantics. Part of Bloom's career

[1] THE WESTERN CANON, by *Harold Bloom*. Harcourt Brace & Co. $29.95. Other cited editions of works by Bloom are *A Map of Misreading* (New York, 1975) and *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, 1973).

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seems to have been devoted to changing Leavis' pluses to minuses and minuses to pluses. Leavis attempted to lower the reputations of Milton and Shelley; Bloom worked equally hard to raise them again. Leavis placed Hopkins far above Browning and Tennyson; Bloom just the reverse. Leavis praised Blake's *Songs of Experience*; Bloom preferred the prophetic books. If for Leavis, Yeats became a great poet by outgrowing his Romantic origins, for Bloom, Yeats ended as a stronger Romantic poet than he began. However well or ill Bloom's theory in *The Anxiety of Influence* applies to any pair of poets, it definitely sheds light on the sense of oppression Bloom felt because of Leavis and because of his New Critical elders at Yale.

If poetic originality is difficult, and it is, how much more difficult is critical originality. Even his chosen subject of poetic influence was not new; W. Jackson Bate's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), though it primarily deals with eighteenth-century writers, offers a more comprehensive and less reductionist guide to the subject than Bloom has yet given us. What enabled Bloom to lessen his burden of belatedness, both in *The Anxiety of Influence* and in subsequent books, was the creation of a vocabulary and frame of reference unavailable to, and no doubt unwelcome to, his predecessors: Gnosticism, Orphism, misprision, the Covering Cherub, revisionary ratios, Lurianic Kabbalah, all creating a Bloomspeak before which any reader must feel "belated."

The Western Canon marks three significant changes of direction for Bloom: he has changed his mind about the significance of Freud for literary criticism; he has reoriented his stance toward the common reader; and, whereas his work from *The Anxiety of Influence* at least through *Agon* (1982) was perceived to be generally friendly to deconstructionism, he has now joined battle with the deconstructionists and their allies.

Bloom writes in *The Western Canon* that "The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary." Twenty years ago he wrote that "the anxiety of influence, from which we all suffer, whether we are poets or not, has to be located first in its origins, in the fateful morasses of what Freud, with grandly desperate wit, called 'the family romance.' " Bloom's "revisionary ratios" of influence were not only "tropes" but "psychic defenses," though he granted that his "transfers from Freudian theory to poetry" might seem "curiously literal." Bloom now speaks of "Freud's curious overvaluation of what he called the Oedipus complex." Freudian literary criticism, like the old joke about the Holy Roman Empire, is "not Freudian, not literary, not criticism." A Shakespearean reading of Freud illuminates and overwhelms Freud; a Freudian reading of Shakespeare reduces Shakespeare. Whereas Bloom previously invoked the authority of Freud (in part, perhaps, to be able to accuse his critical opponents of being in denial), his chapter on Freud in the new book emphasizes Freud's borrowings from and blunders about Shakespeare—for ex-

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ample, Freud's belief that the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare's plays.

Equally as remarkable as Bloom's change of mind about Freud is his new opening to the common reader. Most of Bloom's earlier books were seemingly written to impress other academicians, with many sentences like "*Daemonization*, as a revisionary ratio, is a self-crippling act, intended to purchase knowledge by a playing at the loss of power, but more frequently resulting in a true loss of the powers of making." The chapter on *kenosis* in *The Anxiety of Influence* and the fifth chapter of *A Map of Misreading* could almost have been written by Nabokov's Professor Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Despite Bloom's Kinbote-like ability to find Gnosticism in most of his favorite authors, he states quite accurately that his new book "is not directed to academics, because only a small remnant of them still read for the love of reading." Such an "old-fashioned sense of reading," in which one identifies with characters like Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, now seems to Bloom "the only sense that matters."

Keeping the common reader in mind has significantly improved Bloom's prose. Many readers will enjoy the wit of "[Whitman's] poems of heterosexual passion have convinced no one, including Whitman himself" and the deeper wit of "Ibsen had the mysterious endowment of the true dramatist, which is to be able to lavish more life on a character than one possesses oneself." Bloom shows a welcome insight into human behavior in suggesting that "a secure faith in theater may have given [Molière] a certain detachment or serenity."

The Western Canon defends the validity of the traditional literary canon and celebrates some of its most prominent authors. Bloom does not define the canon theoretically, but offers numerous descriptive metaphors. The canon is "the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written." The pragmatic function of the canon is "the remembering and ordering of a lifetime's reading." The canon is "a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral." It is "a gauge of vitality." Writers elect themselves to the canon by wagering on their writing. Bloom suggests that "The strength of the canonical is manifested in the quiet persistence of the strongest writers." Ultimately, "the Western Canon *is* Shakespeare and Dante," a judgment with which Pound and Eliot would have agreed. One test for the canonical is that "unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify." Bloom places particular emphasis on the original strangeness of the canonical work: "works are appropriated by [the canon] for their singularity, not because they fit smoothly into an existing order."

Bloom ably upholds the canon against attacks by the six divisions of what he calls "the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians," whom he excoriates as "amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdeter-

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mined cultural historians." He observes that "left-wing critics cannot do the working class's reading for it." Indeed, if someone believes that aesthetic value "is only a mystification in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes?" We all know the answer to that one: a purported concern for the exploited classes is a status symbol for a subclass of bourgeois intellectuals, not intended as a principle for actually altering one's own life.

Bloom further argues—rightly, I think—that "primarily each ambitious writer is out for himself alone and will frequently betray or neglect his class in order to advance his own interests." Great writers, he suggests, "are influenced by one another without much regard for political resemblances and differences." The devotion numerous left-wing American poets have felt for Ezra Pound offers a striking confirmation of Bloom's thesis. Bloom demonstrates that although Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt were diametrically opposed politically, they praised Milton in similar terms. He points out that those who contend that the canon is arbitrary must be able to show why the "dominant social class" selected Shakespeare rather than Ben Jonson to center the canon. I would add that they must also show why *As You Like It* was assigned a higher role in the canon than *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and why no English-language play between Farquhar and Shaw has been admitted to the canon. They must also show why popular authors like Judith Krantz—and there have been scores of such authors since the eighteenth century—who do represent the world-view of the dominant social classes have not been admitted to the canon.

Some of Bloom's most eloquent words concern the decline of his profession due to the School of Resentment. He writes that

> many of the best students will abandon us for other disciplines and professions, an abandonment already well under way. They are justified in doing so, because we could not protect them against our own profession's loss of intellectual and aesthetic standards of accomplishment and value.

He suggests that literature and teaching depend on "people who were fanatical readers when they were still small children," and fears there may be "no more generations of common readers, free of ideological cant." Departments of English and American literature, as opposed to "cultural studies," may become as small and beleaguered as classics departments are now. Obviously *The Western Canon* is written in the hope that this will not be the case.

As strong as the polemical sections are, most of *The Western Canon* is devoted to celebrating canonical authors from Dante to the present (oddly, Bloom includes no essays on Greek or Roman authors). Bloom offers many interesting and provocative ideas: that Shakespeare's

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characters develop by overhearing themselves talk; that most critics underestimate the intellectual complexity of Emily Dickinson's poems; that the autoerotic is an important component of Whitman's work; that Hedda Gabler is a troll-like character no societal possibilities could satisfy; that an asexual aestheticism pervades even Virginia Woolf's seemingly political writings. The sections on *Persuasion*, *Bleak House*, and Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* catch the tone of each novel especially well. Noting that Chaucer rarely writes an unironic passage, Bloom suggests that Chaucer's irony is his principal instrument for discovery, by compelling readers to determine for themselves precisely what he has invented. Curiously, given his interest in writerly anxiety, Bloom mentions in passing but does not discuss the theory that the relationship of Clov and Hamm in *Endgame* reflects the real-life situation of Beckett and Joyce. The Shakespearean references Bloom finds in *Endgame* seem extremely far-fetched by comparison. Like many critics, Bloom finds more merit than I do in the work of Borges, who seems to me the most overrated fiction writer of the twentieth century. Borges' reputation may result less from his charming if slight fictions than from his implicit reassurance to professors that literature is, after all, only an intellectual game.

Perhaps the most controversial part of *The Western Canon* is the list of canonical authors and works at the end of the book. In general, Bloom's lists through the nineteenth century should cause relatively little disagreement, although the medieval section omits the splendid Anglo-Saxon poems *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, along with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*. The twentieth-century selections will occasion the most debate. The list, though absurdly long, still leaves out notable works. According to Bloom, the Western Canon includes *Myra Breckinridge* but not *Lord of the Flies*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Steppenwolf*, *Siddhartha*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Franny and Zooey*, or *Lord of the Rings*. Bloom omits the short stories of Doris Lessing and William Trevor (which demand comparison with the short fiction of James, Lawrence, and Hemingway), as well as the remarkable nonfiction of Robert M. Pirsig, Annie Dillard, and Peter Matthiessen. Matthiessen's Conrad-like novel *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* is also left out.

The most egregious omission is probably Edward Albee. As often happens with canonical works, the weaknesses of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* were apparent from the beginning but have proven to be much less important than the energy and vitality of the whole. Albee's Martha is one of the four classic stage roles for American actresses, along with Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Albee is not the only important dramatist omitted. While one can imagine arguments against including Noel Coward, John Osborne, Caryl Churchill, William Inge, Lanford Wilson, Peter Shaffer, Christopher Hampton, or Brian Friel, to ignore all of them while

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choosing David Rabe, David Mamet, and especially Edward Bond seems peculiar, to say the least.

An inevitable difficulty of attempting to define a canon is deciding when to honor one's own critical judgment and when to defer to received opinion. Some works *are* in the canon; some works *should be* in the canon. The categories overlap considerably but are not identical. I dislike John Marston's *The Malcontent*, but it is part of the canon of Elizabethan drama. I think Thackeray's novel *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* is a brilliant tour de force, every bit the equal of *Vanity Fair*, but *Vanity Fair* is canonical, and thus far *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* is not. Bloom notes that he is including the poetry of Robert Lowell and Philip Larkin against his own taste. In other instances he might also have deferred to critical consensus. He may wish that Irving Feldman, Alvin Feinman, and Allen Grossman (all of whom he includes) were canonic and that Allen Ginsberg (whom he does not) were consigned to oblivion, but such is not the case.

Bloom describes some of the writers included in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* as "fit precursors for many of our prematurely canonized poetasters and inchoate rhapsodists." This quotation came to mind often when I read Bloom's long list of twentieth-century American poets. Does Bloom seriously believe that Kenneth Koch, Jean Garrigue, and J. D. McClatchy—to choose only three examples—are canonic authors? Such better-known poets as Hayden Carruth, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Kenneth Rexroth, and Anne Sexton are all missing from Bloom's list, as is Jack Gilbert, the contemporary poet not in the canon who most surely belongs there. To Bloom's choices from the admittedly weak interregnum generation (b. 1934–1943), which include Charles Wright, Mark Strand, Charles Simic, and Alfred Corn, I have no hesitation in preferring Robert Hass or the Louise Glück of *The Wild Iris*. I was amused to discover in Bloom's canon two books published in 1994 that I greeted less than rapturously in the Winter 1995 *Hudson Review*. To Bloom's credit, he includes some worthy writers I would not have expected him to like: Weldon Kees, Edwin Muir, and Donald Hall, for example.

At the very least, Bloom's list of canonical authors and works provides a useful starting point for discussion. *The Western Canon* is an intelligent, stimulating, and, wonder of wonders, readable account of both the crisis facing English departments and the literary inheritance which proponents of the School of Resentment are eager to discard. Just as some people believe that only Nixon could have changed American policy toward China, perhaps Bloom is now exactly the right person to make the case for literature, aesthetic value, and the Western Canon.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

Poetry Chronicle

READERS WITH ONLY A CASUAL, OR DUTIFUL, interest in poetry seek out poets they can be comfortable with. Shades of the schoolhouse begin to close round such readers when poems require too much deciphering. So, according to their temperaments, they will gravitate to poets of amiability or moral earnestness, whose work they will reward with a knowing chuckle or an approving nod.

Among contemporary poets few can rival Galway Kinnell for sheer amiability. The press kit accompanying his twelfth collection, *Imperfect Thirst*,[1] declares, "One of the foremost performers on the poetry circuit, Kinnell inevitably draws enormous crowds with his readings." He is a Pulitzer winner, a MacArthur Fellow, and the Poet Laureate of Vermont, where Hugh Schultz, who owns the Wheelock Village Store, has saluted the poet as "a hometown body" and "a heckuva nice guy, real easy going, low-key." If ever a poet had to be found to endorse a new brand of bran flakes, here is the man.

In the world according to Kinnell death is, unproblematically, an aspect of life in Vermont.

> In the other animals the desire to die comes when existing wears out existence.
> In us this desire can come too early, and we kill ourselves, or it may never come, and we have to be dragged away.
> Not many are able to die well, not even Jesus going back to his father.
> And yet dying gets done—and Eddie Jewell coming up the road with his tractor in the back of a truck and seeing an owl lifting its wings as it alights on the ridgepole of that red house, Galway, will know that now it is you being accepted back into the family of mortals.
>
> "The Biting Insects"

One might ask of such a death where its sting is, but surely a poet is entitled to imagine his own death in whatever terms he likes. There is nothing wrong with being comfy. Comfy feels good, and it is Kinnell's mission as a poet to share his good feelings with his readers, as when

[1] IMPERFECT THIRST, by *Galway Kinnell*. Houghton Mifflin. $19.95.

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at the close of another poem, "The Music of Poetry," Kinnell finds himself

> . . . here in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I lean
> at a podium trying to draw my talk to a close,
> or a time zone away on Bleecker Street in New York,
> where only minutes ago my beloved may have
> put down her book and drawn up her eiderdown
> around herself and turned out the light—
> now, causing me to garble a few words
> and tangle my syntax, I imagine I can hear
> her say my name into the slow waves
> of the night and, faintly, being alone, sing.

If Kinnell's amiability is a late-night snack of milk and cookies, James Tate's *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*,[2] which won the 1994 American Book Award for Poetry, is a whole box of Little Debbie Snack Cakes. Kinnell was born in 1927, Tate in 1943—a generation gap that is reflected in their divergent sense of a becoming diffidence. Each approaches his audience aiming to reassure them that the poet is no stuffed shirt or fruitcake but a regular kind of guy. In Kinnell's case this doesn't rule out a degree of relaxed dignity and old-fashioned lyricism. For Tate poems must eschew the poetical altogether. His esthetic is one of false-naive candors and surrealistic whimsies. He is an underground cartoonist without portfolio, as in these opening lines of "Jim Left the Pet Cemetery with a Feeling of Disgust."

> We hope to avoid everlasting mistakes.
> We had a custom-made coffin for the boa.
> It was fifty times longer than a pencil box.
> As for the parakeet, she fit inside a snowball.
> Music played, *Jim's Total Health Book* was read.
> "Mind your eggs," was all it said.
> Jim walked around the snowfield and photographed eggs.
> We installed a birdfeeder over the gravestone.
> The deceased seemed pleased.
> A woman no one knew tried to buy socks from everybody.
> She said, "This is a town made out of nothing,"
> and no one disagreed. Dagwood drew faces on the eggs.

This is to the poetry of the academy as "Beavis and Butthead" is to prime time sitcoms, an artificial burp whose artful subtext is the suggestion that good table manners are arbitrary and undemocratic;

[2] WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF FLETCHERS, by *James Tate*. The Ecco Press. $20.00.

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that serious poetry is equally silly; that, just like Dylan said, everybody must get stoned.

If Kinnell is a cup of mulled cider and Tate a toke on a '60s bong, Mary Jo Salter is an above-average Beaujolais nouveau. She has yet to win a Pulitzer, but she surely will. Already she's had fellowships from the N.E.A., the Guggenheim, and the Ingram Merrill Foundation. Her poems regularly grace the pages of *The New Yorker*, and were they paintings they would be just as at home in the interiors we may glimpse in its ads. When Salter looks about for a metaphor, it often takes the form of domestic appurtenances. A cloud becomes "a rough-hewn rug of nubbled shearling, thrown / perilously near the sun, as if on / the floor before a fire."[3] In Iceland rain and hail fall together "as if from one combined / salt and pepper shaker." Most telling is the metamorphosis noted in "Boulevard du Montparnasse":

> Once, in a doorway in Paris, I saw
> the most beautiful couple in the world.
> They were each the single most beautiful thing in the world.
> She would have been sixteen, perhaps; he twenty.
> Their skin was the same shade of black: like a shiny Steinway.
> And they stood there like the four-legged instrument
> of a passion so grand one could barely imagine them
> ever working, or eating, or reading a magazine.
> Even they could hardly believe it.

In its rapt estheticizing of *les nègres* this is more French than all Gaul, where blacks signify, in the cabarets of Montparnasse, the jungly side of love. Surely, Salter's beast with four legs is a lineal descendant of Josephine Baker. Were Salter to have seen the same couple in a doorway in Harlem, would they have shone like a Steinway, and would her inability to imagine them "ever working, or eating, or reading a magazine" have had the same pastoral quality?

Class distinctions are the great dividing line in American poetry, all the more divisive for being, officially, invisible. Readers attuned to the genteel decorums of Salter's poetry would gravely resent questioning the privileges she enjoys with such a patrician grace. One's class, like one's color, is a fact of life, not to be altered but rather accepted, as Salter does, with demure thanks and occasional moments of dread. Salter says as much herself in her "Letter from America":

> . . . A cozy life, and safe—
> we still have Avon ladies, scout troops, still
> let in a man who claims to want to check
> a meter in the cellar. But hop into

[3] SUNDAY SKATERS, by *Mary Jo Salter*. Alfred A. Knopf. $20.00.

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the car, and five miles south it's something else.
Boarded-up windows. Crack vials and broken glass.
An old mill town, now poor and Puerto Rican
mostly, though to us they may as well
be ghosts. . . .

The same ghosts, and others closer to home, haunt *Winter Numbers*, the latest collection from Marilyn Hacker, which has been released in conjunction with her *Selected Poems, 1965–1990*.[4] Among the poems in the later, admirable book are many that celebrate those pleasures of hearth and home, including the bedroom, that are Salter's customary environs. Hacker's poems in this vein exhibit both a greater gusto and a higher poetic polish, to that degree that the poet's gifts are more in evidence than her good breeding. Indeed, in her novelistic sonnet sequence, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (which has not been excerpted for the *Selected Poems*), Hacker's erotic (and culinary) adventures are chronicled with a lip-smacking candor that has made it a landmark of lesbian literature. If only the book had been funded by the N.E.A., it would surely have won for her the most excited condemnations of Jesse Helms and his ilk.

Winter Numbers represents a darker soulscape. She has had breast cancer, surgery, and chemotherapy. Many friends have died—from AIDS, cancer, and suicide. She confronts her trials and losses as best she can—with stoicism; with a muted and sometimes scattershot anger (how *ethically* cognate are AIDS, cancer, and the Holocaust as enemies of life?); and with an unfailing mastery of syntax. In the last particular she demonstrates how rhyme and meter may be not only a refuge but a strength, for the habit of thinking enforced by formal poetry, with a respect for contingency, paradox, and nuance, is of value not simply in dealing with a complex rhyme-scheme but in being able to treat of matters that are, in their nature, turbulent and destabilizing. In the Horatian ode, "Against Elegies," that leads off the book, Hacker bears witness "for my own dead and dying," commemorating the deaths of her peers, while noting, ruefully, how "irremediable death is farther away from them," i.e., from "my old friends, my new friends who are old, or older, sixty, seventy . . ."

. . . . they seem to hold
it at bay better than the young-middle-aged
whom something, or another something, kills
before the chapter's finished, the play staged.
The curtains stay down when the light fades.

[4] WINTER NUMBERS, by *Marilyn Hacker*. W.W. Norton & Company. $17.95. SELECTED POEMS, by *Marilyn Hacker*. W.W. Norton. $22.00.

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"Against Elegies" is one of those rare poems in which a poet's sorrow and a public occasion find perfect congruence. There are many other poems in the book almost as perdurable, one of which, "Elysian Fields," offers an instructive contrast to Salter's averted gaze before similar street scenes. After a closely observed inventory of venders and the wares they've spread on a Broadway sidewalk, Hacker points her moral in quietly underplayed couplets:

> . . . What we meant by "poor"
> when I was twenty, was a tenement
> with clanking pipes and roaches; what we meant
> was up six flights of grimed, piss-pungent stairs,
> four babies and a baby-faced welfare
> worker forbidden to say "birth control."
> I was almost her, on the payroll
> of New York State Employment Services
> —the East 14th Street Branch, whose task it was
> to send day workers, mostly Black, to clean
> other people's houses. Five-fifteen
> and I walked east, walked south, walked up my four
> flights. Poor was a neighbor, was next door,
> is still a door away. The door is mine.
> Outside, the poor work Broadway in the rain.
> The cappuccino drinkers watch them pass
> under the awning from behind the glass.

David Wojahn's poems in *Late Empire*[5] bear an almost parodic resemblance to Hacker's, in that they unite a penchant for strict form with a simmering political correctitude that, in the case of Wojahn's collection, seems almost encyclopedic in its outrage. In the course of the ten poems that comprise Part I of the book: "A skinhead waves a broken bottle at / a scared Bengali kid" ("Late Empire"); Dutch sailors hunt dodos to extinction, and grade school children are herded under their desks for a cold-war air raid drill ("Extinctions"); an abortion clinic worker is stoned by a mob of protestors ("Clamor"); a guileless Polish immigrant removes asbestos under the aegis of mob contractors ("Hive Keepers"); the poet as a child discovers his father's stash of porn ("My Father's Pornography"); more porn, this time fueling the random gunfire of rebel forces in Luanda in 1975 ("Homage to Ryszard Kapuscinski"); a Boston cop cudgels two fighting swans to death with "blow after blow after blow after blow" ("Videotape of Fighting Swans, Boston Public Gardens"); a concentration camp prisoner is beaten to death ("Xerox of a Photograph of Bergen-Belsen"); and at a city beach a "doctor/lawyer/investment banker"

[5] LATE EMPIRE, by *David Wojahn*. University of Pittsburgh. $22.95; $19.95.

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scores crack from "a black guy" ("Human Form"). Ten poems, ten different buttons pushed.

The next two parts of the book are sonnet sequences—one set fairly strict, one sonnetary in length only—in which the poet tries to come to terms with his memories of his working-class parents. Unfortunately, compassion is not Wojahn's strong suit, and what comes across is less an adult poet's reconciling vision than a teenager's unrelenting resentments. Wojahn has a knack for poetry of high dudgeon, but in *Late Empire* he lacks the anecdotal and imaginative focus that distinguished the poems in *Mystery Train* (1990), particularly the series of imagined rock'n'roll vignettes that form the memorable title sequence.

The quality specifically missing from *Late Empire* is the basis of Andrew Hudgins' conspicuous success in *The Glass Hammer*,[6] a verse memoir of the poet's childhood, which Wojahn himself has reviewed in *Poetry* (January 1995), where he notes that Hudgins writes about "a distant father and alcoholic mother straight from central casting"—parents, in that respect, just like his own. But what a difference in their portraiture. While Wojahn portrays his parents at moments of emblematic anomie ("Her gin / Glass sweating on the table, I watch her doze, / The book dropped to the floor." Or, of his father: "Just an arm now, lifting bourbon / To the disembodied mouth. . . ."), Hudgins is an inspired gossip, zooming in on the telling details, the anecdote at once particular and universal, as when his nightmarish Granny Raines plants her kiss of death on his toddler lips. Sometimes he simply offers a catalogue of family catch phrases, or jokes, or, as here, "Threats and Lamentations":

> I'll jerk a knot in your tail, boy.
> Jack's staring at me. He's touching me.
> Mom, George is breathing on my face.
> What *am* I going to do with you?
> Go shake the dew off your lily.
> We won't be stopping every five yards
> for you to pee. Don't try me, boy. . . .

Again and again, Hudgins' instinct for buried psychic treasure would trigger congruent memories of my own childhood, an effect that Wojahn's reminiscences never had, even though we both grew up in Minnesota with similar social backgrounds. Hudgins is Southern in that enviable sense that imparts to the work of Eudora Welty or Carson McCullers a cruel humor and linguistic crackle that derive (as do those lines above) from a *community* of, if you'll forgive the pun, wise crackers. One can imagine *his* relatives, even the fearsome

[6] THE GLASS HAMMER: A Southern Childhood, by *Andrew Hudgins*. Houghton Mifflin. $18.95.

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Granny Raines, reading his poems avidly, resenting them bitterly, and laughing aloud from start to finish. For Hudgins is very funny, one might even say mercilessly. (Wojahn writes, reprovingly, "Sometimes these gestures make us wince.") One splendid poem, "The Needs of the Joke Teller," recounts, as Wojahn has it, "an interminable string of singularly non-PC (and often singularly unfunny) entries from the Hudgins Joke Book." He just doesn't *get* it, though Hudgins' poem goes out of its way to explain:

> Punch lines are cheerful bullies. They trip
> the taboos, knock them to the dirt,
> sit on them and tickle them
> until the unwilling laugher begs
> in tears, for mercy. That's why, at sixteen,
> this was my favorite joke: . . .

It is for Hudgins to tell you the rest. Readers who can relish ribaldry without experiencing PC guilt or watch a good sitcom without worrying that their neighbors might think them lowbrow will have a ball with *The Glass Hammer.*

Ann Lauterbach lives in another universe, far from rage or pain or unwonted mirth; a place stripped bare of furniture and history and all other vulgar points of reference. A philosophical universe where the big epistemological questions get asked over and over again: What is real? Who am I? What's happening here?[7]

> Then the real is a convincing show? Of course
> the beam looks real, but is more melancholy
> an inhalation of breath moving across
> to a charged little image.
> It's like looking at a forest
> through the eye of a needle
> "For Example (5): Song of the Already Sung"

A literalist might want to ask what kind of beam moves its melancholy breath across charged little images (of what?), before having to deal with the question of how the real-seeming beam resembles a forest seen through the eye of a needle. To such a literalist the poet of *And For Example* has this to say:

> *upon the asylum / of course / into something / for*
> *repressively / of patients / to five or six hundred*
> *of that sort / on the edge / on all sides*
> *from the semantic / against moral treatment / with it*

[7] AND FOR EXAMPLE, by *Ann Lauterbach*. Penguin. $14.95p.

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Of course! This is that on-the-edge, with-it poetry that works by erasure and fragmentation, and, in the words of Lauterbach's leading blurb writer and role model, John Ashbery, "goes straight to the elastic, infinite core of time." Does that make it clearer? No? Then, let Bin Ramke, another blurbist, explain: "Ann Lauterbach works at an intersection between the esthetic and the activist. Her poetry makes the material world a part of the grand glamour of dangerous words." A privilege that the material world has been longing to attain ever since the elastic, infinite core of time began.

If that seems flippant or lacking in respect, let me note, as a matter of plain fact, that Lauterbach is an official MacArthur genius and the head of the writing faculty in the M.F.A. Program at Bard College.

Rita Dove can trump that: she is the Poet Laureate of the United States, not to mention the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah* (1986). Her current offering, *The Darker Face of the Earth: A Verse Play*,[8] is a recension of the Oedipus myth set in South Carolina in the days of slavery. An ambitious undertaking, all the more so in that it can't help but challenge comparison to one of the most remarkable theatrical successes of the 1980s, Lee Breuer and Bob Telsons' musical, *The Gospel at Colonus*, not to mention the challenge to such translators and adapters of Sophocles as Yeats, Cocteau (twice), and Fitzgerald.

In the event, Dove's play is so wanting in theatrical imagination and poetic vigor that, competitively speaking, it doesn't even leave the gate. A *Booklist* reviewer quoted on the back cover claims that this is "a classic tragedy, in blank verse," but it evidences no closer acquaintance with Sophocles' original than might be gathered from a paragraph of plot synopsis, nor is it in blank verse, but rather in the laziest sort of free verse—at once short-winded and overblown. Here is how Augustus, Dove's Oedipal hero, raises the banner of revolt:

> That's all right, old man;
> I have no quarrel with you.
> You've fought your battle and now
> you just want to live out your life
> in peace. But there's a new breed
> growing up in this New World—
> and if the white folks don't
> give us our freedom, we'll fight for it!

And here is the climax of the action, the moment when the Jocasta figure is compelled to reveal to her son and paramour the secret of his birth:

[8] THE DARKER FACE OF THE EARTH: A Verse Play, by *Rita Dove*. Story Line Press. $10.95p.

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Haven't you figured it out yet?
Yes, Louis did take to slave girls;
ask any of them. Diana has his eyes.
But you—

AUGUSTUS: Diana my sister?

AMALIA: —you are not his son!
Hector knew;
that's why he went to the swamp.
And I never touched him again.

(AUGUSTUS looks slowly, desperately at her.)

Now do you understand?
I—am—your—mother!
(bursts into wild laughter)
Your mother!
(begins to reel through the room, laughing incessantly)
Your mother!

AUGUSTUS: NO!

Finally, two volumes—a Selected, and a New and Selected—that will commend themselves not only to thrifty readers but to those who prefer poetry that ventures beyond the perimeters of a poet's private life and daily weathers. Such distillations of an entire career (to date) ought to receive much more than a passing commendation; a Festschrift might be more in keeping, not only for Pattiann Rogers and C.K. Williams but, as well, for Marilyn Hacker's *Selected*, noted above. On the other hand, for readers who have missed a matured author's earlier harvests, by dint of inattention or simply youth, what a smorgasbord such books can be!

Pattiann Rogers writes in that richest indigenous vein of American poetry that combines scientific discourse (particularly natural history) with a sublime, raptured egotism, a tradition stemming from Emerson and Whitman and continued in our time by poets like A.R. Ammons and Albert Goldbarth (who appears among the poet's blurb writers on the back cover of *Firekeeper*).[9] If one excludes the prose writer Annie Dillard, Rogers is the most notable contemporary female writer in that tradition.

Her poems are not so hyperkinetic as Goldbarth's, not so apt to carom from one end of the galaxy to the other in a few lines. They lack the rigor of Ammons' analytic discourse, but they make up for

[9] FIREKEEPER: New and Selected Poems, by *Pattiann Rogers*. Milkweed Editions. $12.95p.

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that with almonds, currants, and other savory sweetnesses, as in these opening stanzas from "The Power of Toads," which takes its cue from Marianne Moore's prescription for poetry:

> The oak toad and the red-spotted toad love their love
> In a spring rain, calling and calling, breeding
> Through a stormy evening clasped atop their mates.
> Who wouldn't sing—anticipating the belly pressed hard
> Against a female's spine in the steady rain
> Below writhing skies, the safe moist jelly effluence
> Of a final exaltation?
>
> There might be some toads who actually believe
> That the loin-shaking thunder of the banks, the evening
> Filled with damp, the warm softening mud and rising
> Riverlets are the facts of their own persistent
> Performance. Maybe they think that when they sing
> They sing more than songs, creating rain and mist
> By their voices, initiating the union of water and dusk,
> Females materializing on the banks shaped perfectly
> By their calls.

Of all the collections reviewed here, C.K. Williams' *Selected Poems*[10] was the one I kept returning to most often, as I might phone a friend who's always home, always welcoming, and always has a new angle on What's Happening. Williams' signature long, long (eight to ten beat) lines and looping syntax seem to be generated more by a liking for lucidity than a lyrical impulse, yet one never feels, as one does with Kinnell or Hudgins, that his poems are simply inspired conversation. They have the force, rather, of the best journalism—human interest stories, editorials, news flashes from around the world and across the street, all of it rendered in a level tone that one is surprised to find so surprising.

> Here was my relation with the woman who lived all last autumn
> and winter day and night
> on a bench in the Hundred and Third Street subway station until
> finally one day she vanished:
>
> we regarded each other, scrutinized one another: me shyly,
> obliquely, trying not to be furtive;
> she boldly, unblinkingly, even pugnaciously; wrathfully even, when
> her bottle was empty.

[10] SELECTED POEMS, by *C. K. Williams*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $22.00.

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So begins "Thirst," a poem that puzzles over "the dance of our glances" for six more stanzas that are notable less for their rhetorical energy (though it suffices) than for the poet's determination to imagine an inner life for a figure we all know and dread to think of. For Salter she would be a "ghost" among the crack vials of drive-thru slums; for Hacker and Wojahn a comrade at the barricades. For Williams she is one among literally hundreds of characters whom he has imagined as intensely as Pattiann Rogers has imagined her red-spotted toads.

The dramatic gift is not a requirement for writing good poetry. Some poets, like Ann Lauterbach, lack it entirely; their mental horizon stops at their own hairlines. Others, like Rita Dove, aspire to drama, but have no gift for speaking in other voices than their own, so that "characters" can speak only in the clockwork accents of received wisdom.

But those poets fortunate enough to possess a dramatic gift, like Williams or Robert Browning or Richard Howard, live in a larger and more blessed universe, a fact reflected in the largeness, psychological complexity, and variety of their oeuvres. "Thirst" is a single poem among some 150 that bulk out 279 pages of a book that is most notable for its social and discursive range. Poetry, Williams would seem to be saying, between his lines, can be *about* something. It can matter.

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Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

I feel pressed to comment upon Josiah Fisk's essay, "The New Simplicity: The Music of Górecki, Tavener and Pärt" in the Autumn 1994 issue of *The Hudson Review*. This article is elegantly written, so much so as to be excerpted on the rear cover of the journal as an indicator of the treats within. But Fisk's conclusion, that the output of the composers under consideration is essentially emptiness within a form that is attractive to the consumer, should probably refer not to the music but to his own review.

Fisk's main point is twofold: Pärt, Górecki and Tavener can all be lumped into the category of "Simplists," and this musical genre, particularly at the hands of these composers, is merely "faux naïveté" that "strips an ancient art of its brains." Harsh categorizations and sweeping conclusions don't come easily in real life; one often has to tweak the evidence. In this particular case, the categorization and the conclusion appear to have been made by virtue of a highly selective listening to the composers' respective outputs.

As I am by far most familiar with the music of Arvo Pärt, I will use him to illustrate the chief problem I see with Fisk's essay. He has deliberately chosen the pieces in Pärt's output which, in the repetition of their themes and more subtle evocation of form, might better lend themselves to the categorization of "Simplism." (Fisk gets a lot of mileage from scoffing at the liner notes to each and every one of these works. In fact, I can't remember when I ever saw liner notes get so much attention in a music review.) But has Fisk's essay discussed pieces like the *Miserere*, *Stabat Mater*, *Te Deum*, or the *Berliner Messe*? No, even though some of them appear in the appended "list of recordings discussed." They are not considered, one might gather, because they make it difficult or impossible to persist in categorizing Pärt as an out-and-out Minimalist (or "Simplist") and decisively exonerate him from Fisk's charges of artistic and spiritual void. (Górecki too, despite a list of some seven "works discussed," is summarily disposed of after considering one sole composition, the popular but hardly representative Symphony No. 3.)

I am not a great fan of Tavener, nor of Górecki, and would probably be prepared to agree with Fisk's appraisal of them if I weren't acutely aware that my experience with those composers is limited to two or three of their more popular works. If I were to discuss these musicians with any integrity, I would do some deeper

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and broader listening. I hope that this article has not discouraged your readers from doing the same.

Princeton, N.J. Peter Bouteneff

Josiah Fisk replies:

I join Mr. Bouteneff in hoping that my essay doesn't discourage anyone from listening to the music and judging it for themselves, and I second his contention that "deeper and broader listening" is a firm prerequisite to any discussion worth having.

Where we part company, it seems, is in what we get out of this music. Listen as I may, all I can hear in the works of the New Simplicity—whether minimalist in construction or not—is an aggressive attempt to constrict musical content as it has been understood in the Western tradition for the past thousand years.

This is not exactly a subtle matter, something that might or might not be there depending on how hard you go looking for it. The impression, for me at least, is immediate, constant and overwhelming. And it's every bit as strong in the *Passio*, the *Stabat Mater*, the *Te Deum*, the *Berliner Messe*, as in the pieces I happened to use as examples (I chose popular pieces so that more readers would know what I was talking about).

This is what makes the program notes so worthy of commentary. The discrepancy between word and deed is positively Orwellian; you'd think the New Simplists had created some revolutionary new form of beauty, instead of just carting most of their inheritance to the dump. Even if you think that's what needs to be done, it's hard to argue that you'd need an artist to do it.

What the popularity of the New Simplists undoubtedly does reflect is the scope of the contemporary appetite for "spiritual values." The appetite is real, but the offerings of the New Simplists seem, at least to some of us, more like spiritual junk food than spiritual nutrition. As to whether Pärt is guilty of this charge Mr. Bouteneff and I may not agree. But what's that muted aside about Górecki and Tavener? Perhaps we are not so far apart after all.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID MASON was named the 1994 Minnesota Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. His new essay, "The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry," will appear in an early issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . A memoir of William Empson by GEORGE WATSON will also be published in a forthcoming issue of *The Hudson Review*. . . . PETER MAKUCK, 1994 winner of the Charity Randall Citation from the International Forum, has a new collection of poems, *Shoreline*, published by Green Tower Press. . . . LUCILLE DAY is director of the Hall of Health, a museum in Berkeley, California. Her essays and reviews have appeared in various West Coast publications. . . . TED KOOSER's most recent book is *Weather Central* from the University of Pittsburgh Press. . . . NEAL BOWERS is currently at work on a collection of essays on contemporary poets and on a nonfiction account of his experiences as a victim of plagiarism. . . . MICHELE WOLF's chapbook, *The Keeper of Light*, is the 1995 winner of the *Painted Bride Quarterly* Poetry Chapbook Series competition.

BRADLEY OMANSON's* "Class" is from a manuscript of poems in progress about his family home in Stark County, Illinois. . . . RICHARD HORNBY will be spending the fall in London, studying English actor training, and going to the theatre fanatically. . . . JOSIAH FISK recently finished preparing a new edition of *Composers on Music*, an anthology of composers' writings, to be published by Northeastern University Press. . . . BERT CARDULLO was recently promoted to the rank of Associate Professor, with tenure, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY has published two books this year, *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories* (Persea Books) and *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (Henry Holt). . . . HAROLD FROMM and Cheryll Glotfelty (co-editors) have spent the last few months putting into final form their anthology, tentatively titled: *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. It will be published in the spring of 1996 by the University of Georgia Press. . . . The seventh edition of *American Fiction*, which ALAN DAVIS edits, will be published in November by New Rivers Press. . . . DAVID DOOLEY's second book of poems, *The Revenge by Love*, has just been published by Story Line Press. . . . THOMAS M. DISCH's new novel, *The Priest: A Gothic Romance* (Knopf) has just been published. His *The Castle of Indolence: On Poetry, Poets, and Poetasters* will be brought out by St. Martin's Press in September.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Lewis was a Christian conservative from around the age of *thirty, which is to say before I knew him; and since I am* neither one nor the other, there was never any question of a doctrinal influence. If I was not exactly a friend, still less was I a disciple. That in no way altered my sense of admiration and affection. He was much given to writing and uttering witty homilies embodying views I respected rather than shared, and this proved an embarrassment to neither of us, since we both thrived on dissent. In fact I doubt if he would have known what to do with agreement, any more than I would. . . . The best teacher I ever had, and the best colleague, he did not ask or expect me to share his convictions.

—George Watson, "C.S. Lewis: A Memoir," p. 229.

From the upstairs bedroom, he could see Sonny still on the roof. He had a string in his hands. Kurt followed the upward arc of the string to a pair of linked box kites with glittery silver tails that dove and climbed again; one was yellow, the other bright red. The air around them was sooty as the chimney of a hurricane lamp before it went out. Sonny was laughing. The first tracers of rain already made long diagonals on the window.

—Peter Makuck, "Costly Habits," p. 240.

Paglia appeared onstage wearing an outfit evoking Dracula in drag, starting off extremely mannered, very uptight, all her characteristic facial and verbal tics ticking away like mad. She seemed to be anticipating immediate antagonism and was prepared to meet it by slapping the audience's faces with a whole haberdashery of gloves. Though she told us she was a lesbian and that her favorite people were gay men, she attacked the feminists, she attacked the gays, she attacked the lesbians, she even attacked the English Department of the University of Chicago.

—Harold Fromm, "O, Paglia Mia!," p. 308.

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